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VOL. 2507.

A DAUGHTER OF THE TROPICS.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT.

IN TWO VOLUMES. — VOL. 1.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.

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A DAUGHTER OF THE TROPICS

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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

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A DAUGHTER
OF
THE TROPICS.

A NOVEL.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,
AUTHOR OF "LOVE'S CONFLICT," "VÉRONIQUE," ETC.

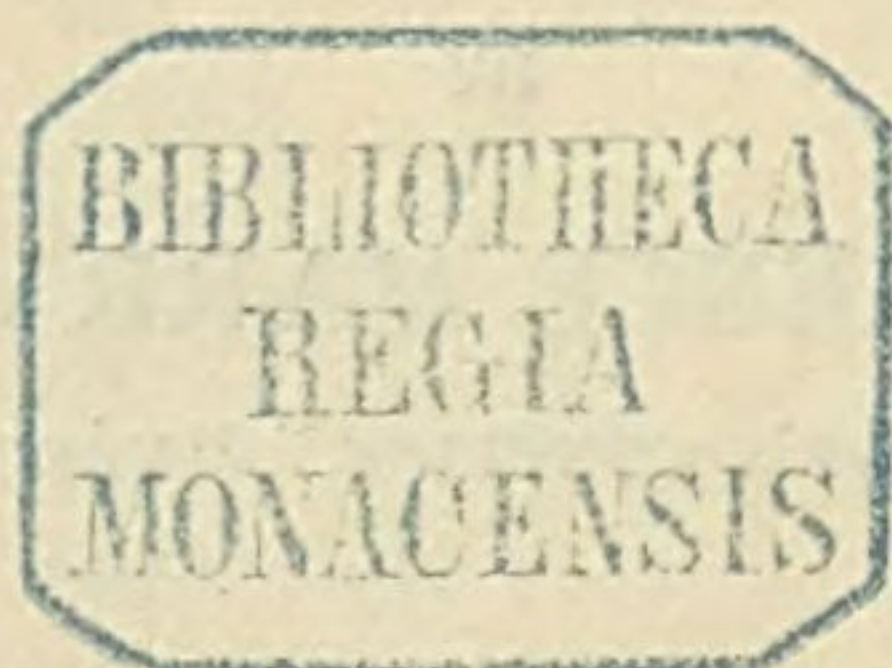
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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

LEIPZIG
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1888.

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A DAUGHTER OF THE TROPICS.

CHAPTER I.

“WHO IS MRS. ARLINGTON?”

COLONEL ESCOTT walked along Oxford Street as if he trod on air. It was the month of May. The trees in Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens had just assumed their mantles of tender green. The lilacs and laburnums were in bloom. The rain and the east wind had gone to play their pranks in some less favoured country for the time being, and London was at its best.

To Colonel Escott, after a twenty years' exile in the East, it appeared a paradise. The handsome shop-fronts, rich in wares of every nation; the busy crowds that thronged the pavement; the rattling omnibuses and cabs—all spoke to him of a life that he had missed too long, and which seemed to infuse his veins with new vitality. How delightful,

how ecstatic, it is to return home to England after a long and enforced residence abroad, is only known to those who love, and have been compelled to leave her.

Nothing seems common—nothing seems unclean. The very faces which custom makes us vote homely and vulgar appear to beam with smiles of welcome. The discordant sounds which later on, perhaps, will distract our ears, are full of music. We cannot be incommoded, nor put out of temper. We forget the rain—the fogs—the mud—the smoke, which are integral parts of the dear old country and her metropolis, and think only that her skies are brighter, her air purer, and her children's greetings more hearty than those of any other land.

At least so thought Colonel Escott. He had performed prodigies of folly since he had landed at Gravesend. He had given away sovereigns for shillings in the gladness of his heart, and embosomed himself to people whom he had never seen before. He could have kissed every woman he met in the street, especially the pretty ones, if he had only thought they would have taken the expression of his delight in good part.

Whilst living in India with his regiment, groaning over the interval that must elapse before he

could return to his native country, he had fancied he had almost forgotten what London was like. He thought he had been away so long that he should feel a perfect alien when he trod her streets again. But it seemed as though he recognized every stone. He had been a young fellow of five-and-twenty when he saw Oxford Street last, and he had foolishly imagined all the old land-marks would be removed—forgetting that *he* stood there still—but he was finding his way to the Marble Arch as familiarly as if he had sought it the week before. Surely that was the florist’s where he had bought many an extravagant “buttonhole” in the days gone by, and here was the bookseller’s, famous for erudite volumes, to be procured nowhere else.

Colonel Escott’s time was his own. He stopped at the bookseller’s window to examine, with curious pleasure, some prints displayed there. As he did so, two flippant, over-dressed girls passed by, and one of them, looking full in his face and nudging her companion, said, audibly:

“There’s a good-looking fellow!”

The Colonel started and blushed—yes, actually blushed. He was fresh from a land where such compliments are not shouted in one’s ears every day, and he had some remnant of modesty left. He

remembered that he *had* been a good-looking fellow when he was young, at least the girls had insinuated as much to him; but it was long since he had thought of it. The climate of India had made him thin and sallow, and played havoc with his fair curling hair.

Years before he left the country he had considered himself quite an old man, and past all attention from the fair sex. But the remark of the young woman, vulgar as it was, set his pulses beating rapidly. Was it possible, he asked himself, that he still possessed attractions in the eyes of strangers? London seemed twice as big, and as bright, and as beautiful, for the idea.

When the girls had passed out of sight Colonel Escott resumed his walk with a jauntier air, and stopped again, with almost a sensation of guilt, at the first upholsterer's he came across, to see if he could catch a glimpse of himself in one of the mirrors. Who shall say that men are less personally vain than women? the best of them are more easily reached through flattery than by any other means.

The mirror into which Colonel Escott looked revealed the figure of a very personable man. Tall and slight—too slight indeed for middle age, but

that was the fault of India—with fair hair thinned upon the crown, good features, drooping moustaches, and eyes of a cerulean blue. The voyage home by long sea, which he had been advised to take for the sake of his health, had restored much of his natural complexion, and smoothed more than one wrinkle out of his brow. In fact Colonel Escott was still a good-looking man of his age; and as the conviction struck him he coloured anew, as the possibilities the future might hold for him dawned on his comprehension.

He was a bachelor, and had never dreamed of being anything else. He had expatriated himself for twenty years in order to amass sufficient means to retire on. And he had returned to England with only one idea—to end his days in single blessedness at home. What if fate should hold another life in store for him?

Colonel Escott laughed to himself as he thought of it, but he laughed not *at* the idea, but because of it. And as he laughed he wondered what Kerrison would say to such a thing. For Colonel Escott was not sauntering up Oxford Street without a purpose. He was on his way to see his old friend Mark Kerrison, with whom he had corresponded intimately during the whole term of his absence, and who was the one

person he had looked forward to meeting on his return.

James Escott and Mark Kerrison had been boys at school together and students at college. They had both been intended for the military profession; but Kerrison being too much of a genius to conform to set rules, had left the Academy without leave, and gone upon the stage, greatly to the displeasure of the family, who disowned the boy from that time forward. It was then that the friendship that bound them together had developed itself between the young men. Escott had helped Kerrison with his own pocket-money during those times of distress which are known to most young actors; and Kerrison, who had made his way in the world, had repaid the debt threefold later on.

After a few years spent upon the stage he had accidentally discovered he had a talent for construction and composition; and after having written two or three modest farces, had suddenly blossomed into a three act comedy that took the town by storm, and made his name as a dramatic author.

Escott had heard and read of Kerrison's successes for years past, but he never realized the extent of them until he returned home, to hear all the men at the clubs talking of nothing but the merits

of his friend's latest venture, “Apollon.” To hear the world's verdict, one would have thought that Mark Kerrison was the greatest dramatist that had ever lived—so lavish is society of her praises, *while they last*.

“How strangely things turn out!” mused Escott, as he pursued his walk to Hyde Park Gardens.

“Who would have thought twenty years ago that Kerrison and I should meet again like this! I—who had every prospect at that time of inheriting my uncle's wealth—a retired officer on nothing but my half pay, and he, who was penniless and disowned by his family, at the top of the tree and rolling in riches! I, who was surrounded by friends, with not a creature left to care for but himself; and he, who was cut by his nearest relations, sought after by the whole world! Kismet! it is fate. He has genius and I have none; that makes all the difference. And we are both single too. I wonder at that as far as Mark is concerned. He must have had so many opportunities, whilst I was spoilt for that sort of thing from the beginning.”

And here Colonel Escott stopped his speculations with a little sigh. His thoughts had flown back to a forbidden subject—for the only time during his long absence that he had met with a

woman he would have cared to marry he had met her too late, and it would have been better for the happiness of both if they had never met at all. That had been an episode of some years past now, and the sting of disappointment was almost dead within him. Still, he could not recall it without offering up a sigh on the shrine of "what might have been."

But he soon shook off the feeling as his steps brought him nearer to the house where his friend Kerrison resided, and his imagination pictured the warm welcome in store for him.

But Colonel Escott was behaving rather like a boy in the matter. He had not apprized his friend of his arrival in England, which had only taken place the day before. He wanted to take him by surprise. Consequently, he had rushed off, on landing, to his chambers in the Albany, only to find he had vacated them some months before for a house in Hyde Park Gardens.

"A splendid place, my dear Escott," an old acquaintance at the club had told him. "A perfect palace, where he lives like a prince, by Jove!"

And so the morning sun found Colonel Escott on his way to the new address. As he came in

sight of it, he was ready to endorse the opinion he had heard.

A noble-looking mansion of many stories, facing the park, and blooming with flowers from basement to attic, confronted him.

Colonel Escott halted on the opposite pavement, and gazed up at it in sheer amazement.

"Can this possibly be the place, or have I made a mistake?" he thought. "It seems too sumptuous a residence altogether for a single man! What can Mark do, all by himself, in such a palace? He cannot occupy one-half the rooms. I hope—I *hope* he is not thinking of getting married?"

And with a slight sinking at the heart, which betrayed how much he had depended on finding he was still first with his boyhood's friend, Colonel Escott walked across the road, and knocked at the front door.

The first words he heard were a disappointment. Mr. Kerrison was not at home, and the servant was unable to say when he would be.

"But it is only eleven o'clock. I had no idea he would be out so early. Does no one in the house know when he will be back again? I am one of his oldest friends just home from India, and

I shall be terribly disappointed if I have to return without seeing Mr. Kerrison."

The poor Colonel spoke so ruefully, and his chagrin was so visibly depicted on his face, that the footman asked if he would like to walk in and speak to Mrs. Arlington.

"*Mrs. Arlington!*" exclaimed Escott, in a tone of surprise. "*Who is Mrs. Arlington?*—the house-keeper?"

The footman smiled.

"Well, yes, sir, she do keep the house; but she's bound to know more of master's movements than anybody else, sir; and I'm sure she'll be most happy to give you any information about him if you'll please to walk in."

Thus adjured, and being anxious to ascertain the whereabouts of his old friend, Colonel Escott followed the servant into a breakfast-room on the ground floor, which opened on to a glass house of ferns, and gave him a card to carry to Mrs. Arlington.

"Will you give that to the housekeeper," he said, in his stately, old-fashioned way, "and say I shall be obliged if she can see me for a few minutes. I will not detain her long."

The man took away the card, and Escott walked

about the room, too restless even to admire the beautiful paintings in water-colour that adorned the walls; whilst he momentarily expected the door to open and admit some respectable old lady. He waited longer than he had anticipated, however, and had begun to think the housekeeper did not intend to see him at all, when the footman reappeared to say that Mrs. Arlington would receive him in the library.

Somewhat astonished at the coolness of the message, Colonel Escott caught up his hat and stick, and suffered himself to be conducted to another apartment on the same floor—a long, low room at the back of the house, darkened by velvet hangings and stained glass, and spread with carpets on which the foot fell noiselessly. A room, lined with books, and hung with pictures, with a wood-fire still burning on the tiled hearth, and a heavy perfume as of incense pervading every part of it. A room, in fact, to dream in—to cherish the dreams which are true, and shut out the treacherous world which is false—to live, to think, and to become famous in.

Colonel Escott embraced the influence of the chamber at a glance, but he had no time to analyze its charm, for the unexpected sight that met his eyes prevented his thinking of anything else. Seated

at a writing-table, with her back towards the fire, and her feet stretched out upon a white bearskin rug, was one of the most striking-looking women he had ever seen.

Although the spring was warm, and there was a fire in the room, she was clad in a gray velvet dress. She was neither dark nor fair. Her dull blue-black hair and full brown eyes were Spanish in colouring and expression, but her delicately-tinted complexion, *piquante* nose, and rather wide and full-lipped mouth, betokened a mixture of English blood. Her speech, also, had not the slightest accent to betray a foreign origin.

As Colonel Escott appeared she rose from her seat and stood to receive him, evidently waiting for him to speak first; but he halted in the doorway, too confounded to say a word.

"I believe you are Colonel James Escott," she said, at last consulting the card in her hand. "Pray be seated. Is there anything that I can do for you?"

CHAPTER II.

TWO OLD BACHELORS.

"I—I BEG your pardon," stammered the Colonel in reply, "but are you Mrs. Arlington?"

"I am," she answered, with a little bow, but no smile, nor yet the least embarrassment.

"I was not quite prepared to meet a lady. I only landed in England yesterday from India, and Mr. Kerrison is my very oldest friend."

"Indeed!"

"He has not mentioned me to you, then?"

"Mr. Kerrison is not likely to confide his private affairs to me, sir; but if you are his friend, you are sure to be welcome."

"Thank you. We have known each other for more than five-and-twenty years. He is not at home they tell me?"

"Not at present; but he may return at any moment. He went down to Richmond yesterday to dine with a friend and passed the night there. I am sure he will be very sorry to miss you."

"I have been looking forward to meeting him again for years," replied the Colonel, in a tone of disappointment.

"Pray wait then, if your time is your own, and see if he does not come in," said Mrs. Arlington. "I fancy he will be home to luncheon, as he gave no orders to the contrary. Will you look at the paper?" handing him the *Times*, "and if you'll excuse me I will go on with my duties."

Upon which Mrs. Arlington bent her head again over the table and recommenced to write.

Colonel Escott, from behind the shelter of the *Times*, kept on glancing at her furtively. What a handsome creature she was! What rich outlines! what brilliant colouring! Her lips were scarlet, and there was a glow on her face like the heart of a damask rose. And what an exuberance of vitality seemed to pervade every glance and feature! The worn-out man from India looked at her as he might have looked at a goddess of Health and Beauty. The mere sight seemed to infuse new life into his veins! He was a poor judge of women's ages. Men who have only seen the miserable specimens of European beauty on view in the East generally are; but he did not think she looked a day over twenty-

five or thirty. But what was she doing in Mark Kerrison's household? That was the question that puzzled him. She could not be a servant, with those manners and in that dress! Escott's obsolete idea of a bachelor's housekeeper was of some elderly female in a black gown and a mob-cap, armed with a bunch of keys, and as uninviting as she was absolute.

It had never come within his province to see the smart young ladies who offer themselves nowadays to superintend the *régime* of a bachelor's or widower's establishment, with the unexpressed though rooted hope of eventually superintending the bachelor or widower himself.

Had the Colonel been a little more *au fait* with our modern innovations, he might have decided Mrs. Arlington to be Mark Kerrison's amanuensis or lady-secretary; but in India at that period they had never heard of such appointments. So he only stared at her whenever he had an opportunity of doing so unobserved—and wondered why she was there, and if Kerrison thought her half as beautiful as he did—when he was suddenly roused from his *rêverie* by the sound of a footstep in the hall, and by hearing Mrs. Arlington say, as she rose from her seat;

"Here is Mr. Kerrison, Colonel Escott. I am so glad I persuaded you to be patient!"

As she passed him to announce his arrival to the master of the house, he thought her bloom was considerably heightened; but he had hardly time to think of anything before Mark Kerrison was in the room, holding both his hands in a grasp of brotherly welcome.

"My dear, *dear* Escott!" he exclaimed, with a suspiciously-humid look about the eyes, "I had no idea you were already in England! I was wondering only just now how soon you could possibly arrive. And you are really here! Why, your last letter said we should see you about the beginning of June."

"So I thought, Kerrison; but we made an unusually quick passage. The first thing I did on landing yesterday was to rush off to your old chambers in the Albany. But you were gone. So I came on here this morning. You won't think I have lost any time, old boy!"

"I would kill you if you had," returned Kerrison, heartily. "And now you are here, you don't go away in a hurry again, Jem. Just send for your traps, and settle yourself down with me at once and for ever."

"But, Mark," remonstrated the Colonel, returning

to the dear old boyish mode of address, "you know I never meant——"

"Are we friends, or are we not?" cried Kerrison, with mock fierceness.

"The very best of friends, I hope."

"Well, say no more about it then, but take up your abode with me. Why, I was thinking of it the whole time the house was getting ready, and your suite of rooms is waiting for you. No one else has used them, Jem. And there I hope you'll remain. For ever if it so pleases you, or at all events till some fair English piece of red and white entangles you in her toils."

"*That* will never be!" replied Escott, gaily.

"All the better for you, my boy. But, joking apart, Jem, I am alone and I *want* you. I have never made a friend since we parted who fulfilled my requirements. I have looked forward to your return as to a holiday. Don't try and rob me of my pleasure now it has come."

"You are too good, Mark," replied the Colonel, with a break in his voice. "I have lost all my own belongings by death; and I confess that, had I found you changed, I should have wished I had never come home. But I did not expect this. I have done nothing to deserve it."

“Stuff and nonsense!” said Kerrison. “Had it not been for your assistance in my struggling days, I should never have stood where I do now. Do you think I have forgotten *who* stinted himself of the actual necessities of life in order to help me in my need? If you do, you cannot care for me as I care for you! And now that I have more than I want—actually more than I can spend—am I to deny myself the pleasure of trying to return your goodness? For this is no privation to me, Jem, as your kindness to me in days past was to yourself. I am a solitary man. For all my success my heart is empty, and you will confer another obligation on me by helping to fill my house. Have you the heart to refuse me after that?”

“Say no more, Mark,” replied Escott, in a husky voice. “I will stay here, for awhile at least, with pleasure. Heaven bless you, for all you have said to me! It is worth coming home to England to hear!”

“That’s spoken like yourself!” cried Kerrison, heartily. “And now, that matter being settled, what do you think of my house?”

“It is simply perfect. I little thought to find you in such a mansion.”

“Ah! my boy, the dramatist’s profession is the

most lucrative of all nowadays. I am sometimes astonished at my own success. But it is all luck. Any man might have it who got the chance. But tell me—am I much changed?”

He stood before him, as he spoke, in the full light of the May morning.

Escott regarded him narrowly.

Yes, there was no doubt he was much changed, but it was for the better. Twenty years before Mark Kerrison had been a dark and rather heavy-featured young man, with a prominent forehead and bushy eyebrows, that gave him almost a forbidding aspect. Now, the keen eyes and large nose were tempered by the gray hair that hung over them, and the perplexed look of thought had given place to a settled content. He looked older than his friend Escott, but less careworn. Prosperity had softened his features, and improved his expression. He was, in point of fact, a better-looking man than he had been at five-and-twenty.

“You are altered, Mark—naturally!” said the Colonel, after a critical survey, “but it is an alteration for the better. You even look younger to me, in some ways, than you did when we parted. I am afraid you cannot say as much for me.”

“You were always a good-looking fellow, Jem,

and you're a good-looking fellow still," replied Kerrison, "and I shouldn't wonder, when English air has set you up a bit, if we don't have the girls setting their caps at you as they used to do in auld lang syne. But let us leave off admiring each other like a couple of women, and think of luncheon instead. I am sure it must be time for it. I'm awfully hungry."

"You have passed the night at Richmond?" observed the Colonel, interrogatively.

"Yes; with my friends the Marshalls—charming people; father and mother both well-known artists, and daughter preparing for the stage."

"The daughter is the attraction, perhaps?" said Escott, with a meaning smile.

Kerrison answered it by a shake of the head.

"No, my boy; you don't catch me that way. It would take all the beauties of London to entangle me, and then I bet I'd find a hole in the net somewhere. Don't waste your time in speculation, Jem. I'm an old bachelor, *pur et simple*, and I shall remain so till the end of the chapter."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Escott. "It's just what I mean to do myself. I've seen too much of the evils and too little of the benefits of matrimony,

especially for men of our age, to be tempted to put a halter round my neck."

"We will serve each other for company for the rest of our pilgrimage!" cried Kerrison, gaily. "But here's luncheon," he continued," as a footman appeared to announce the meal. "Come and have a snack, Jem, and we'll call for your traps afterwards. Order the brougham for three," he said to the servant as they entered the luncheon-room, where a delicate repast was ready for them.

Colonel Escott stood for a moment by his chair, looking expectantly towards the door.

"What are you waiting for, Jem?" demanded Kerrison, as he sat down.

"I thought — I imagined —" stammered the Colonel, "that—that Mrs. Arlington—the lady I saw on my arrival—would join us."

Kerrison stared at him in surprise.

"*Mrs. Arlington!* O, dear no! She takes her meals in her own room. Sit down, old fellow, and make yourself at home. Remember, you *are* at home now, and this is the first and last time I shall play host to you."

Colonel Escott seated himself with a faint laugh. He was vexed at having been betrayed into such an error as mentioning Mrs. Arlington. He fancied

the servant even, was inwardly chuckling at the mistake.

The idea made him bashful, and he ate his luncheon in silence, until the footman had left the room.

Then he asked, but rather timidly:—

“Mark—if you don’t mind telling me—*who is Mrs. Arlington?*”

Kerrison elevated his eyebrows, laughing.

“Mind telling you, my dear boy! Why should I mind telling you? I thought you would have guessed she is my housekeeper. And a capital housekeeper, too, as you will acknowledge after a little experience.”

“O, yes! I feel sure of that! But—but she seemed such a very superior sort of person to me, Mark.”

“A lady? Certainly! She *is* a lady. I would not employ anyone else! You see, Jem, when I found that my position required a more important establishment, I was obliged to find some one to look after it. A man cannot be expected to order dinners and regulate the maids’ holidays; and Mrs. Arlington was only too willing to accept the responsibility!”

“But who *is* Mrs. Arlington?”

"How curious you are, Jem! That's the second time you've asked me the question; and I wonder if you'll be any the wiser if I tell you. Well, she is the widow of old Arlington—a broker with whom I had some dealings in days gone by. He was supposed to have a lot of money, but died worth nothing, and so she was obliged to look about for some means by which to earn her living. What can a woman, left in such a position do? I don't suppose she could teach if she tried, and she's too good to wait behind a counter. So, when she found I wanted a housekeeper, she applied for the situation, and she got it. *Voilà tout!*"

"She is very beautiful," observed the Colonel.

"Handsome? Yes," said the other, carelessly, "I suppose most people would call her handsome, but not *beautiful*."

"How do you distinguish the two attributes, Kerrison?"

"She has good features, Jem; but there is no other beauty in her face that *I* can see. However, tastes differ!"

"Has she foreign blood in her veins?"

"She *may* have. I believe some one told me she came originally from the West Indies, but I have not been sufficiently interested in her to in-

quire further. But she is a very clever woman—there is no doubt of that.”

“She was writing when I arrived,” said Escott.

“Copying some of my hieroglyphics, most likely,” laughed Kerrison. “She is of immense use to me in that way; in fact I don’t quite know what I should do without her. And I have had assistance from her brain too. She is quick and imaginative, sees a situation sometimes before I do, and has on several occasions helped me to a climax. She is a talented woman also—speaks French like a native, and plays and sings well; but she never struck me as beautiful. She has too coarse a mouth.”

“*What!*” cried his friend, starting. Her lovely coral lips had struck him as her greatest charm.

“She has not a good mouth,” repeated Kerrison, “and her figure is too heavy. I like refinement and elegance in a woman. Your redundant Hebes are not in my line. But I see you don’t go with me, Jem; you are captured already. I might have guessed what would happen with such a susceptible nature as yours.”

The Colonel blushed to the roots of his hair.

“Twenty years’ battering in the East don’t leave a man with much susceptibility, Mark. By the way, do you remember the little milliner we crossed

swords for when we were eighteen? I believe it was that quarrel made us friends for life. If I remember rightly, she jilted us both, and we were fain to console each other. May it never be otherwise, Mark. May we ever find for every wound a consolation in our mutual friendship."

And, raising his glass to his lips, James Escott drank the toast, in which his friend joined him with moistened eyes and an outstretched hand.

CHAPTER III.

WILL HE MARRY HER?

As soon as the meal was concluded, Kerrison rang the bell.

"Tell Mrs. Arlington to come here," he said briefly to the servant who answered it. "We will inspect your quarters first, Escott," he continued to his friend, "and see how you like them, and then go in search of your belongings."

Mrs. Arlington did not keep them waiting. She appeared without delay, and stood on the threshold with the knob of the door in her hand, looking like a picture framed in the doorway. Colonel Escott, after the little conversation he had held with Kerrison, regarded her with fresh interest. She was certainly a beautiful woman. He could not understand anyone thinking otherwise. But on nearer inspection he perceived that there was a slight wave, carefully smoothed down, in her blue-black hair, and that her cheek-bones were rather high, and there was a certain squareness of formation about the

upper and lower portions of her face. Still, if not faultless, she was a magnificent creature, and he watched with admiration the graceful curves of her figure. But Mrs. Arlington looked at Mark Kerrison, and not at Colonel Escott.

"Mrs. Arlington," commenced the former, "my friend is going to stay with us, and will occupy the bronze suite."

The lady slightly elevated her brows.

"You mean the Japanese room, do you not, Mr. Kerrison?"

"Not at all. It has a northern aspect. It is only pleasant in summer. I mean that suite in front of the house looking out on the park, over the drawing-rooms."

Up to this point Mrs. Arlington's red lips had been curved into a smile, but at Mark Kerrison's answer the smile palpably faded away.

"O, I beg your pardon, sir, I am sure. It was my mistake. I thought you wanted one of the bachelor apartments for the Colonel."

"I want the one I say—the bronze suite. You must not forget that Colonel Escott is fresh from the East, and has been used to any amount of air and space."

Escott, recalling his whitewashed and barely

furnished chamber at Saddlepoor, smiled furtively, and eagerly disclaimed so much trouble being taken on his account.

"My dear Mark, any room will do for me. I am sure the bronze suite will be far too good. I cannot consent to monopolize your best apartments. Pray allot me something smaller and humbler."

"I shall do no such thing. You will sleep where I choose to put you. Besides I furnished the bronze suite expressly with an eye to your complexion. It consists of a bed-room, dressing-room, and sitting-room. Just the very nest for a bachelor, where you can live as secluded a life as you choose, and smoke your hookah like a jolly old anchorite all day long."

"I expect you won't let me be much of an anchorite, Mark," cried the Colonel. "However, do with me as you will."

"Colonel Escott's visit, then, is likely to extend over the season?" interposed Mrs. Arlington, inquisitively.

"It will extend to the end of time, I hope," rejoined Kerrison. "My friend has consented to take up his abode with me, Mrs. Arlington; and it will not be my fault if he ever seeks another home."

"I don't mean to—until you marry and turn me out," said Escott, laughing.

"We are chums for life then, Jem. I would rather die than marry any day."

Mrs. Arlington had stood silent during this little passage of arms, with something very like a frown darkening her handsome features, and at Kerrison's last words she turned away as if to hide them.

"Shall I lead the way upstairs, sir?" she asked, deferentially.

"Do, Mrs. Arlington, and we will follow you," said Kerrison, slipping his arm through that of his friend. The woman went silently before them, sweeping the staircase with her velvet train, and Escott could not help wondering, as he walked in her wake, why she seemed inimical to the new-formed plan. He could almost have fancied she had taken a sudden dislike to him. She certainly was very indifferent to his presence; but the idea did not repulse him. On the contrary, it rather put him on his mettle to attempt the conciliation of so handsome a woman. The bronze suite proved to be all it had been represented and more. It was beautifully furnished, had a bath-room attached, and was replete with every comfort. The Colonel reiterated it was too good for him.

"If you say another word I shall quarrel with you!" exclaimed Kerrison, "and so will Mrs. Arlington. The obligation is on our side, not on yours. The house has looked like a barrack hitherto, though she has done her best to make it comfortable for me. Now it will feel for the first time like home."

"I have, as you justly observe, done my best, Mr. Kerrison," said Mrs. Arlington, in a tone of pique.

"And everything has been most beautifully ordered. Don't think for a moment that I wish to disparage your kind attentions, Mrs. Arlington; my guests have been astonished at the perfect arrangement of my suppers and dinners. But it is the *people*, not the *place*, that constitute a home; and I feel now as if I had not been half myself whilst Escott was at the other side of the world."

"Are there any other orders?" demanded Mrs. Arlington, as though she were a little weary of these rhapsodies.

"Yes. Let me see; tell Henry to have the little ebonized piano brought up here from the breakfast-room. You used to be fond of warbling to your own accompaniment, Jem. Have you quite forgotten all the love-songs of our youth?"

"Not quite, I think, Mark," replied the Colonel, blushing.

"Then we'll have them over again, old fellow, in the jolly evenings we will spend together here. I shall make this my sanctum, Jem, and haven of repose. I shall run up to you at all sorts of odd times, when I want to escape from other people or myself. You won't mind, will you?"

"*Mind!*" cried Escott, heartily; "I couldn't enjoy the room if I had it all to myself."

"Well, there's the piano to come up here, Mrs. Arlington, and the two recesses in the windows to be filled with plants—and I think that's all. We'll make the other improvements ourselves, eh, Jem?"

"My dear Mark, you overwhelm me! I don't know what to say in return. I felt so lonely when I landed at Gravesend yesterday. I little thought I was coming to a *home*."

"And a *brother*," continued Kerrison, affectionately, as he threw his arms about the shoulders of his friend, and passed down into the hall, leaving Mrs. Arlington alone, and biting her lips, in the bronze suite.

"Where did you sleep last night?" he asked a few minutes later, as they entered the carriage that was waiting for them.

"At the Tavistock."

"I will drop you there then, and you will bring

back your traps in time for our seven-o'clock dinner; after which, if you are not tired, we will drop into the Meridian and see my 'Apollon,' or have a pipe at home and a talk over old times, eh?"

"I am at your service," replied Escott. "I will settle my bill, leave my address at the club, and be back in a couple of hours."

But at the club he encountered Riley, the man who had described the glories of Kerrison's new house to him, to whom he communicated his intention of taking up a permanent abode with his old friend.

"By Jove! you're in luck!" cried Riley. "You'll live like a prince, my boy. And what does the fair Lola say to the arrangement?"

"The fair—*who?*?" demanded Escott.

"The fair Lola—Lola Arlington!—old Arlington's widow—who keeps house for Kerrison. Weren't you introduced to her?"

"His housekeeper! O! yes; I saw her; a very stylish handsome-looking person."

"I guess you *did* see her. I don't know how you could miss it; she's generally all over the place. I hope you made up to her; it won't do to get on her bad books, I can tell you."

"Is she so very important a personage in the establishment, then?"

"My dear fellow, she's *everybody*! She rules Kerrison with a rod of iron; he daren't say his soul is his own, without asking her permission first."

"It didn't strike me in that light at all," said Escott, feeling a little uncomfortable. "I thought Kerrison was rather curt and authoritative with her than otherwise."

"O, he put that on to mislead you; it's not his usual way. She'll pay him out for it by-and-by. She rules the roast there with a vengeance, and she'll rule altogether some day—see if she doesn't."

"Do you mean to say he'll marry her?" cried the Colonel, in dismay.

"Bound to! Everybody can see that with half an eye; why he can't move without her. She not only orders his household affairs for him; she regulates his expenditure, and writes half his plays; she has but to say she'll leave, and Kerrison would be at his wits' end. He could never replace her. O, the fair Lola is a very clever woman, you may take my word for it. Matrimony is the stake she plays for, and I'll back her to win. Kerrison's a doomed man; the halter is already round his neck."

These insinuations of Riley's had the effect of a

cold water *douche* on Colonel Escott's pleasant anticipations.

What if they should prove true! He felt half inclined to take all his belongings back to the hotel. And yet how earnestly had Kerrison disclaimed all thought of marriage.

"I think you will find you are altogether mistaken," he said, rather loftily, to his informant. "My friend and I have no secrets from each other, and we have discussed this matter already. He told me most distinctly this afternoon that he had not the slightest intention of changing his condition."

Riley went off in a fit of laughter.

"Very likely; I've no doubt he did. But Mrs. Arlington intends to change hers, which is much more to the purpose. '*L'homme propose,*' you know, '*et la femme dispose!*' That's the proper reading of the proverb. And really she's a magnificent creature. I admire her immensely myself! She is quite out of place as a housekeeper. She would look much more appropriate at the head of the table."

"What made her accept such a situation?" mused Escott.

"When a rich bachelor sets up house, my dear Colonel, there are always plenty of young and

fascinating widows (real or pretended) ready to keep it for him with a view to future promotion. But Mrs. Arlington is the genuine article. Her husband, old Arlington (whose real name was Agar), was a money-lender, and as great a rogue as can be found in the length and breadth of London. He had dealings with the West Indies, and on one of his return voyages he brought back this woman with him. She was a handsome girl then of perhaps twenty, but—well her beauty has always been the best part of her!”

“Kerrison told me she came from the West Indies,” said the Colonel, thoughtfully. “That accounts for her colouring. I suppose she has dark blood in her.”

“That’s it!” exclaimed Riley, “slave blood. She’s a Creole. I heard old Arlington throw it in her teeth one day when he was in a temper. And she stabbed him for it too—right through the arm!”

“Good Heavens! Does Kerrison know it? Would he permit her to retain her position in his household if it were true?”

“My dear fellow, where do you come from? Did you ever know a man give up his *penchant* for a woman because she has a little of the tigress in her disposition? O, she’s made it all right with him.

He thinks there's no one like her. She has made herself so necessary to him that she can dictate her own terms."

Escott sighed audibly.

His spirits had gone suddenly down to zero.

"Used she to help him before he went into that house?" he asked.

"O, yes! for some time! Many people think he only took it as a pretext to have her always at hand. However, that's as it may be. There's no doubt his plays have been twice as successful since she associated herself with his work."

"How I wish I were clever," said Escott, "that I might take her place in helping him."

"*That* you could never do, my dear Colonel, had you the wisdom of Solomon and the humour of Swift! It's a woman's wit he needs—a woman's touch to round off his ragged edges—a woman's fancy to give his love-passages reality. Kerrison couldn't afford to part with Lola Arlington now, even if he wished it."

This conversation quenched all the brightness with which Colonel Escott had contemplated taking up a residence with his old friend, and sent him back to Hyde Park Gardens dispirited and uneasy.

Kerrison soon perceived the change and attributed it to fatigue.

"You are knocked up with the excitement of landing, Jem; and no wonder," he observed. "We will not go out this evening; we will have coffee carried up into the sanctum, and enjoy a pipe and a game of whist together before we go to bed."

Still the Colonel could not shake off the depression that had attacked him, and the friends smoked for some time in silence.

With the coffee came Mrs. Arlington—not carrying it, indeed, but simply accompanying the footman, to hear if there were any further orders for the night.

Kerrison waited till the servant had disappeared before he answered her.

"I have no more commands," he said; "but I have a request to make. My friend here is overtired and out of sorts; stay for half an hour, Lola, and sing us some of your little songs. I am sure they will charm him out of his melancholy."

Escott started as he heard Kerrison address her by her Christian name, but Mrs. Arlington did not seem to think it anything unusual. Evidently she was used to it; also to being asked to exhibit her talents as a vocalist.

"Of course I shall be happy to sing if you wish it," she said, as she promptly took her seat at the piano.

Her voice was melodious, low, rich, and sweet; and her songs were the wildest, most bewitching carols Escott had ever heard. Yet his spirits sank lower and lower as he listened to their tones falling and swelling through the apartment, until there was a little crowd outside the house railings, eager to catch each note of the unexpected concert. But Mark Kerrison seemed to accept Mrs. Arlington's services rather cavalierly.

He did not relinquish his pipe, nor go near her whilst she sang; and when, after nearly an hour had elapsed, she rose from the piano, saying:—

"There, I think I must have tired you both out."

All he replied was—

"Thank you; you're in excellent voice. We have enjoyed it very much. Good night."

And let her leave the room with no more cordial salutation than a bow.

Still, Colonel Escott could not exorcise the demons of jealousy and suspicion that were making him miserable, and taking deeper hold with each talent this woman showed that she possessed.

"Jem, my dear fellow, you are making me wretched," said Kerrison, at last. "Do, for Heaven's sake, tell me what is the matter. Are you repenting of your promise to live with me?"

"Not at all, Mark. It is I who shall be wretched if the plan has to be given up."

"Then why are you in the blues?"

"Will you let me tell you? Will you treat me as a friend and a brother, and not be angry with me for putting a question to you that is very near my heart?"

"My dearest Jem, ask me what you choose. Nothing could make me angry with you."

"Then," exclaimed the Colonel, with an effort, "forgive me, Mark, if I am wrong—but have you any idea—even the remotest—of *marrying Mrs. Arlington?*"

CHAPTER IV.

"SHE HAS BLACK BLOOD IN HER."

MARK KERRISON wheeled slowly round in his chair, and regarded the Colonel steadily in the face.

"Jem," he said, after a long pause, "what did you have to drink at the club this afternoon?"

Escott tried to turn it off with an uneasy laugh.

"Don't be ridiculous, Mark! You know it isn't that! Only——"

"Only some fellow has been slandering me to you. You may as well make a clean breast of it. Tell me *who* he is, and *what* he said, and then you shall have my answer straight from the shoulder."

"Well, he spoke of it openly enough; it is no betrayal of confidence, so I see no reason why you should not hear his name. It was Riley, Mark—Captain Lawrence Riley, of the Hussars. He was talking of you, and—and the person I mentioned just now—this afternoon, and seemed to consider it quite a

settled thing that, sooner or later—you would—would—do what I said. Don't think me impertinent in having alluded to it, old friend. It hurt me, just a little, to think it might come to pass, and break up our newly-formed plans. But I can appreciate the suitability of it, and the temptation it must present all the same and——"

"*Can* you!" returned Kerrison, shortly. "*I* can't!"

He wheeled his chair round again to its old position, and smoked for a few minutes in silence.

"They give me credit for infinite good taste, don't they?" he ejaculated at last, "to imagine I should stoop to marry *my housekeeper*? I suppose they judge of a man by themselves."

Something in his tone jarred a string in Escott's breast. He was relieved to hear there was no foundation for his idle fears, but he did not like the ground on which his friend dispersed them.

"I think you are a little hard upon them, Mark," he answered. "Their gossip may be utterly untrue, but, after all, Mrs. Arlington appears to me to be a lady whom no one need be ashamed to take a fancy to."

"She is not *my* fancy," returned Kerrison, "and never will be! There is a great deal about her of

which I completely disapprove, but which it is not worth my while to risk her displeasure for, by requesting her to change. She is far too showy—too dressy—for her position, and she does not always know how to keep to it gracefully. But I suppose it is natural for a woman to wish to make the best of herself, and I could not interfere without stirring up the vials of her wrath. And—as I have told you before — she is useful to me in a variety of ways, and it is my interest to keep her in good-humour.”

“Surely! And why should she not indulge in any innocent fancy? She is young and handsome. No one but a misanthrope could wish her to make the least of her charms! And it must be more agreeable to have a brilliant creature like that about you than some worn-out, toothless, wrinkled old woman!”

“It is really a matter of the most complete indifference to me,” replied Kerrison, carelessly. “It is Mrs. Arlington’s brain that excites my interest. There she is invaluable! But to imagine for a moment I should *marry her*! Old Arlington’s widow—known to every needy scapegrace in the metropolis! Why, Lawrence Riley must be mad to think of such a thing! Besides, she has black blood in her veins!”

"Is that such an insuperable objection to matrimony?" laughed the Colonel. "I have been used to see so many wives with that flaw in their composition."

"To *me* it would be, Jem! I have such a horror of it that I would rather marry a woman 'with a history!' It is never purged from the system! The taint remains for ever!"

"Mrs. Arlington does not show much signs of it!"

"Don't you think so? Wait till you see her in a passion, and then it will come out. She turns green under emotion. But the blood is well diluted. I believe she's an octoroon—seven parts white. Still, it's *there*, and I should never forget it."

"I do not share your prejudice to such an alarming extent," said the Colonel. "Perhaps, in my case, familiarity has bred contempt."

"It is a curious thing," remarked Kerrison, reverting to the original topic, "that a man can never associate himself familiarly with a woman, however commonplace the relations between them may be, without being accused of wanting to marry her! As if the end and aim of every life were matrimony! And so steadily as I have kept aloof from all idea of it!"

"Have you never seen a woman you would have

cared to marry, Mark? Never been in love?" demanded Escott.

"*Never*, my boy; not since the calf-days, you will understand, when a fellow doesn't know what real love means! It's not for lack of seeing women either. My profession throws me constantly in their society. But the sort I see are not always the nicest sort. Perhaps that is one reason. Any way, I have remained unsinged, and can honestly say I do not know what the heartache means."

"You are fortunate," said the Colonel, sighing.

"Ah! Jem, you were always very soft about the fair sex, and I expect that old breast of yours has been riddled through and through. You have accused me of sinister designs on the only female I come in daily contact with. Let me have your confessions in return! You are far the more likely of the two to split our new-born contract on the rock of Matrimony!"

"Indeed! you are mistaken! I am fireproof as yourself. I *was* hard hit some years ago, Mark, but it came to nothing, and I have had no inclination that way since. I should never be so foolish as to dream of altering my condition now! A man's mind and manners get set by five-and-forty. A young

wife wants too much looking after. You may depend on my keeping you company to the end, Mark!"

"We will turn the place into a regular monastery," said Kerrison, gleefully, "and give bachelor parties that shall astonish the world. Not that I never admit the fair sex to my table, Jem. I am not quite such a misogynist as that."

"Your life appears to be a very pleasant one," observed the Colonel, smiling.

Kerrison stopped suddenly with a deep sigh.

"What rubbish am I talking? What good is it all? I take more pleasure in watching the rehearsals of my pieces than in all the folly and frippery the world can afford me."

"I can well understand that," said his companion, "and I fancy I shall learn to take almost as much interest in them as yourself. It must be delightful to see the children of your brain walking and talking on the stage, as though they had sprung from their father's head, like Minerva, ready armed."

The dramatist was charmed by his friend's enthusiasm.

"My dear Jem, it gives me such heartfelt pleasure to hear you talk like that! I feel I shall gain a double amount of energy and power from the very

fact of your presence to encourage me in my work. Yes, it *is* delightful. I am just about to put a new piece into rehearsal at the Meridian, and you must come and watch it ripen, from a disconnected, straggling scene of confusion, to an orderly parade. That is to say, if you are not too much bored the first time to repeat your visit."

"Don't talk of boredom to me yet!" exclaimed Escott. "I am like a boy just home for the holidays, and only afraid they may end before I have done with them. To breathe the air of England, to listen to her language, to be associated with her children, above all, to sit here, my dear old chum, and hear you say my presence adds a charm to your existence, is too much happiness for me to realize all at once. It turns me into a woman, and I dare not try to express my feelings for fear I should break down under the effort."

"Let us go to bed," said Mark Kerrison, practically. "We understand each other now I hope, and need fear no further complication. Good night, Jem. I shall sleep sounder to-night than I have done for years, in the pleasant assurance that the days will never again find me solitary and alone."

With a warm grasp of the hand, the friends separated for the night, Colonel Escott feeling more

relieved than there seemed occasion for at the explanation that had followed his question to John Kerrison. He had never really imagined Captain Riley's statement to be true; but he argued that where there is smoke there must be fire, and thought it probable that Kerrison might greatly admire his housekeeper without having any present intention of marrying her. But he did not even admire her. He mentioned her with a species of contempt.

The Colonel could not sympathize with the contempt, and he thought Mark was very blind not to be able to see her beauty. And yet he resented neither—felt pleased, indeed, when he remembered what his friend had said of Mrs. Arlington, though he could not have accounted for the feeling even to himself.

The morning broke bright and beautiful, and the two men met at the breakfast-table in the best of spirits.

Mrs. Arlington was present—not eating with them, but presiding at the tea and coffee tray, and waiting on the gentlemen with a pretty little assumption of extreme deference.

She was dressed in a white wrapper, with a knot of rose-coloured ribbon at her throat, and Colonel Escott thought she looked even more charming

than she had done the day before. He would have drawn her to take part in the conversation, had not Kerrison interfered every now and then to prevent it with some curt demand for a newspaper that was not in the house, or a letter that had never been received.

As the last cup of tea was poured out Mrs. Arlington rose from her seat.

"You will require me in the library this morning, Mr. Kerrison?" she said, interrogatively.

"Yes, at eleven. And, Lola, look out the parts of 'The Young Misanthrope' for me. They should be in Safe B, righthand corner. I want to alter the schoolmaster's speeches. Did you copy the last scene of 'Miss Credo' yesterday?"

"Yes, sir. It is finished, all but the red lining."

"Put it in, and send it off as soon as possible to Miss Hartlebury. You will find her address in the book. Look sharp. I promised she should have it this morning. You must despatch it by hand."

"And what about dinner, Mr. Kerrison? Any guests this evening?"

"Major Murgatroyd and Mr. Dorinless; and I may bring in another. Prepare for six, please, at the usual time."

"Very good, sir," she replied, as she quietly withdrew.

The Colonel watched the soft folds of her muslin wrapper until she had disappeared from sight.

"How *invaluable* she must be to you!" he observed, when they were once more alone.

"Eh!—what?" exclaimed Kerrison, looking up from the account of last night's debate. "Valuable! Do you mean Mrs. Arlington? Of course she is! What would a man in my position do without a housekeeper? and Lola has no nonsense about her either. She'll take a cab and go off to the market, if necessary, and choose her fish and meat, and bring them home with her. I believe she is economical, too, though I am not a good judge of that myself. And she's a famous sick-nurse. Wait till you get an attack of the gout—confound it, I've had more than a symptom of *that* in the last two years!—and see what a light hand she has, and what a retentive memory! And yet, *on dit*, she led old Arlington the life of a dog. *Some* people say she killed him. I don't quite believe that, though he did go off rather mysteriously at the end. But women are funny creatures. They so eminently believe in the saying, that 'one man may steal a

horse whilst another may not look over the gate.' Ah, Mrs. Arlington—back again! Anything more to say?" he continued, as the housekeeper put her head in at the door.

"Only this, sir. If you do not require my services after luncheon-time to day, will it be convenient for me to occupy the afternoon in visiting my friends?"

"Why, certainly! You have not been in the habit of appealing to me for leave to enjoy yourself, Lola!"

"Perhaps not," she answered, gravely. "When there was only yourself to consider, Mr. Kerrison (and you have always been so *very* considerate to me): but now that there is your friend——"

"Pray don't let the thought of *me* ever interfere with your arrangements!" cried the Colonel. "Why, how could you think of such a thing, madam? I am *no one* in the house, even if I required your kind attention."

"Stop, Jem," said Kerrison, authoritatively; "I can't let you speak like that. Let us settle this matter at once and for ever. Mrs. Arlington is perfectly right. She has only had one person to consider hitherto; now she will have *two*. But as *one* must always take the lead in an establishment, and

I have given the orders until now, I will continue to do so. Only, both you and Mrs. Arlington must understand that we are equally the master here, and that a command from one is the same as from the other. They are the only conditions on which we can live together, and retain our individual dignity. I understand, from her mode of expression, that Mrs. Arlington does not need this explanation from me. It is to you, Jem, I address myself, and I hope I shall never hear you say again that you are *no one* in this house; for if that were true I should be no one myself!"

"*I* shall not be the one to forget your wishes, Mr. Kerrison," replied Mrs. Arlington, respectfully.

"Nor I to make you remember them!" exclaimed the Colonel, trying to look in her dark eyes.

But she only let her lashes fall, as, with a half-curtsey, she turned away from him.

CHAPTER V.

“*MAMAN* IS VERY WISE.”

MRS. ARLINGTON was not attired as fashionably as usual when she went to visit her friends that afternoon.

She was dressed so quietly, indeed, that Mark Kerrison, coming suddenly upon her in the hall, imagined for the moment that she was a stranger. She wore a black dress and mantle, and a plain black bonnet, with a single damask rose beneath the brim. She started slightly as she met her employer, whom she had fancied to be at the other end of London.

“Gone into mourning for your sins, Lola?” he remarked pleasantly, as he recognized her.

“I have some shopping to do, Mr. Kerrison,” she answered, with a little embarrassment; “and I think a woman can never be dressed too quietly when she has to go about the City alone.”

“Right—quite right,” he said indifferently, as he passed into his library.

Mrs. Arlington bit her lips with inward vexation, as he left her standing in the hall; then, desiring the footman to call a cab, she gave him the address of a well-known drapery establishment in Holborn, with some ostentation, before she got into it and drove away.

But she was a woman, made up of *finesse* and intrigue, and Holborn happened to be the last place she intended to visit.

Before her cab-driver reached the Oxford Circus she had desired him to stop at the Soho Bazaar instead, where, having paid and dismissed him, she got into an omnibus for Aldgate, and took a train, which landed her in the Minories, near the East India Docks.

Here was a very different scene from that which she had left behind her.

It seemed indeed, each time she saw it, as though she had stepped from one world into another.

Slopshops, with fustian and oilskin, and corduroy garments hung on lines across the pavement, and flapping in the faces of the passers-by, had taken the place of the newest fashions.

Ham-and-beef shops, with fried fish and pale slabs of unwholesome-looking pudding, were all the

temptations offered to the appetite; whilst her fellow-passengers consisted of seamen, navvies, Chinamen, and West Indian negroes.

Mrs. Arlington had taken the precaution to tie a thick veil over her face whilst she was in the train, but she shaded it closely with her parasol as well, lest she should possibly be recognized in so unsavoury a place.

Yet even in the docks, low as are their surroundings, are to be found some dwellings of an orderly and respectable appearance; and it was to a small row of unpretentious but cleanly looking little houses that Mrs. Arlington finally took her way.

She was evidently expected, for, before she had time to raise the knocker, the front door was opened by an elderly woman in a greasy dress, who greeted her affectionately.

"I knew it was my handsome girl!" she exclaimed, as she embraced her. "I have been watching you ever since you turned into the street. There is no one here who can step out so proudly, and with her head so well held up as my daughter. And you have reason, too—you have reason."

The woman spoke in Creole French, unintelligible to any but the natives of the island of Hayti, where

she came from, and Mrs. Arlington answered her in the same *patois*.

“Hush, mother; don’t let all the dock-yard hear you. Is the *maman* well?”

“As usual, Lolita. Sometimes I think the old lady will not last much longer. She was ninety-eight on her last birthday; yet her memory is clear still—wonderfully clear. But come in, my child, and have some coffee; it is ready waiting for you.”

As she spoke the woman led the way into a tiny parlour, furnished with the barest necessities of life, but which was filled with the fragrant aroma of a pot of steaming coffee.

“It is the only luxury we get,” she whispered, as she poured it out; “and that is through my cleverness, my dear—all my cleverness—and knowing some of the seamen employed in the docks.”

It was difficult to believe, seeing these two together, that they could possibly be mother and daughter, yet it was the case.

Madame Claircine de Pellé (as the elder was called) was a woman of perhaps five-and-forty, and looking ten years older. Her yellow skin was seamed and wrinkled—her coarse black hair had turned iron-grey—and the whites of her eyes were almost brown.

She was only one stage nearer the possession of negro blood than her daughter; but all her characteristics inclined to those of the less favoured race. She was of a lean temperament also, and, in her baggy cotton-dress, and coloured handkerchief tied about her crinkly hair, did not look unlike an old Frenchwoman of the lower orders.

"You are always complaining of your poverty, mother, yet you seem comfortable enough," said Mrs. Arlington, carelessly, as she sipped her coffee.

"Ah! my child, you do not know—you cannot tell! The times are very hard—very hard indeed—and work seems to grow scarcer every day. I have lost the washing of five or six regular customers lately. I do not know the reason. I suppose they are too poor, and so they go without washing. Have you brought any money with you to-day, Lola? A little would help us—a very little out of your abundance."

"*My abundance!*" repeated Mrs. Arlington, scornfully. "You forget I am only a servant, and work for my living like yourself. But I am always ready to add my mite for the maintenance of *maman!*"

Saying which, she drew two sovereigns from her purse and laid them on the table.

Madame de Pellé seized the money eagerly.

“Ah! *Maman's* wisdom is useful to you, Lolita, is it not? And if you will only follow her directions, you will soon be out of your troubles. She sees farther than you do, my dear. The future is opened to her, and she knows what lies before you.”

“It is a long time coming!” muttered Mrs. Arlington.

“Because you do not help yourself, my child. You are too diffident. You might have been the mistress of that house before now, had you so chosen. But you hang back. You let others fill your place. Faugh! I have no patience with you!”

“It is, at any rate, no affair of *yours!*” replied her daughter. “*You* would not benefit, mother, by the change. For I am quite sure I should never be allowed to associate with you!”

“But you would come and see us under the rose, as you do now,” said the elder woman, coaxingly. “You would send a letter and a remembrance sometimes to show you had not quite forgotten us. You would not desert your poor old mother and old *maman*—eh, Lolita?”

“No, I shall never desert you!” replied Mrs. Arlington, wearily.

Yet she was thinking at that very moment how

glad she would be to know herself rid for ever of such associations.

She hated and despised them! She hated herself sometimes for having sprung from so unworthy a beginning, and almost wished she had been born a veritable negress rather than endued with blood that had a taint upon it.

But she was bound to these women by other ties than those of blood, and she *dared* not break them.

"Of course you wouldn't!" returned Madame de Pellé, "for who could advise you like *maman*? You owe the success of your life to her."

"There is another obstacle in my way now," said Mrs. Arlington, as though she wished to change the subject. "An Indian Colonel, who has just retired from the service, and taken up a permanent abode with us. He will keep Mr. Kerrison company during all his leisure hours, and make him more than ever independent of my society!"

"And can't you get rid of this Colonel, my dear?"

"*How* can I get rid of him?" she cried, petulantly.

"Let us go and consult *maman*," said Madame de Pellé, soothingly. "*Maman* always knows what is best to be done! You know how she helped you with Agar——"

“Hush!” exclaimed Mrs. Arlington, suddenly, as she glanced towards the open window. “I am sure I heard a footstep!”

“It is nothing! No one is likely to come here to-day!” replied her mother, closing the casement.

“Has *maman* many visitors now?”

“So! so! It is just as it happens. One sends another, but it is hard to make such a gift known when one dares not advertise. Last week, though, she had several, and all from the West-end—grand folks one could see, though they came in old cloaks and mufflers. *Maman* is so wonderful, and so true, that she has but to be heard to get custom.”

“One dupe makes many!” laughed Mrs. Arlington, softly.

“No, no! my child, it is not that! *You* know (if no one else does) what a wise woman she is! And her charms are miraculous! Eh! her charms make me shudder to think of! But they are not for the public benefit!”

“I wish she would give me a love-philtre,” said Mrs. Arlington, as they climbed the narrow stairs together; “not that I believe in them all the same.”

“Then you are wrong, my child. The *maman’s* love-philtres have driven men mad—mad as hares in March. But she could not distil them here.

They must have human blood in them, and in this extraordinary country one is not permitted to shed blood, however great the purpose. Still, her wisdom is invaluable, and her blind eyes see farther than those of the rest of the world put together."

"Hark! she is crooning to herself," said Lola, halting on the stairs.

"She is singing one of her Vaudoux songs," replied Madame de Pellé. "The old lady's heart is in Hayti, and half her time she thinks that she is there. Do not speak as we enter. She will know at once that I am not alone."

She opened the door of an upper room, which looked out upon the front, as she spoke, and they entered it together. It contained no furniture but a small table and chair, and a stuffed seat, in which sat an aged negress, great-grandmother to Lola, doubled with the weight of years, and totally blind.

Her face was scored and wrinkled like that of a monkey; her sightless eyes were sunk in her head; her parchment-like hands were shrunk and paralyzed. In effect she looked more like a mummy than a human being, and she mumbled so painfully from the loss of teeth that it was very difficult to understand what she said. She spoke a broken English before strangers; but as she recognized her grand-

daughter's step, she addressed her in her native *patois*.

“Hey, Claircine!” she ejaculated, in a cracked voice, “someone is with you. It is our little Lolita!”

“That is true, *maman*,” said Mrs. Arlington, coming forward and taking the old woman's hand, “and Lolita sadly wants your advice again.”

“Ah! always in trouble, Lolita—always in trouble!” replied *maman*, taking a huge piece of crystal from her pocket, and pressing it against her sightless eyes. “Why, who is this I see? A stranger! He stands in your path, Lolita!”

“I know he does,” said Mrs. Arlington with a frown.

“You must get rid of him!”

“How? Not by——”

“No—no! soft means—soft means. He is quite ready for them. He is very susceptible, and he admires you! Let him; draw him on! You don't like him, but you must pretend you do. Then you will be able to twist him at your will, even to further your plans with the other.”

“But the other, *maman*—will he never yield? Ah! it pains me! I want to conquer him so. I would give worlds to see him at my feet!”

“Patience—patience, little one. You are not

bold enough. Let him see your wishes more plainly. He has no idea of them."

"He *will* not see! He is so cold; he thinks of nothing but his plays and their success. I am no more to him than the hand that helps to write them. I have tried, *maman*, sometimes to make him understand my feelings, but he is obdurate. When I sigh, he thinks that I am tired. If I weep, he says I am hysterical. What am I to do with such a man? I don't think he has ever cared for any woman. I am *sure* he does not care for me!"

The old negress chuckled in a feeble manner.

"Hark to our little Lolita, Claircine! She has found a man who foils her. Oh, this is very strange! But press them *both*, Lolita—press them *both*! That will bring the cold one forward. And hark ye, child! *Don't waste your time!* I see a vision coming."

She extended her withered arm as she mumbled:

"Two moons, and a white woman, with mournful eyes, and a dark cloud wrapped around her!—and lightning—yes, lightning, and revenge—and—— Ah, Lolita, you must be quick—*quick*—or it will be too late!"

She grasped Mrs. Arlington's wrist as she concluded, and opened her lustreless eyes wide, as though she could see out of them.

“You frighten me, *maman*,” replied Lola, drawing backwards; “but, any way, I understand one thing—that whatever I do must be done *at once*.”

“Yes; be quick!—*quick!*” reiterated the old woman.

“But I am sure I don’t know what I *can* do!” said Lola, disconsolately, as she rose and stood at the window. But in another moment she had turned excitedly towards Madame de Pellé:

“Mother, a gentleman has turned into the gate—a gentleman I know—Mr. Esmé Fielding. What can he want here?”

“*Tiens!* my child. He comes, perhaps, to see *maman*. So many of the people from the West-end come here now.”

“But I *cannot* see him. It is impossible! If he were to recognize me it might ruin me with Mr. Kerrison. Hark! he has knocked. What shall I do—where can I go? If we meet I shall never hear the end of it.”

“He does come for me!” interposed the old woman, oracularly. “He comes to consult me, and I must receive him; for he comes with gold in his hand.”

“If I go downstairs I shall meet him in the passage, or he may turn into the parlour,” said Mrs. Arlington. “Mother, *where* can you hide me?”

“In the bedchamber, my dear—the door to your

left. The young man will not be long, and I will let you know as soon as he goes again."

"I shall hear every word he says," replied Lola, with a slight laugh.

"And that will hurt neither you nor him," said Madame de Pellé, significantly.

Mrs. Arlington availed herself of the opportunity, and walked at once into the bedroom. As she did so her mother went downstairs and let in the new-comer.

He was an exceedingly handsome young man—dark and aristocratic-looking—with an unmistakable flavour of the West-end about him. He had dressed himself in his soberest suit, but there was no mistaking where he had come from.

As Madame de Pellé opened the door to him, he seemed overpowered by an access of timidity or bashfulness.

"I—I—beg your pardon!" he said, reddening; "but does a person live here who calls herself——"

"The wise woman, Madame Rosita?" interrupted Madame de Pellé. "Yes, sir, she does. Have you come to see her?"

"I was told—I was recommended," stammered the stranger, "that is, yes I have. But is she at home?"

“Yes, sir, she is always at home. Please to walk in and take a chair, whilst I announce your arrival to her.”

Mr. Fielding entered the little parlour as if he were carrying a lighted candle over a powder-magazine. He looked around him as if everything were liable to explode at any moment; but seeing nothing more dangerous in appearance than a deal table covered with American cloth, and a few cane-bottomed chairs, he gathered heart of grace to sit down.

Madame de Pellé took no notice of his perturbed demeanour; she was used to that in *maman's* visitors. Only, as she returned to conduct him upstairs, she informed him that the seeress was very old and very deaf, and he must put his questions to her as distinctly as possible.

Mr. Fielding halted on the staircase with a dread suspicion.

“It is a small house,” he said, dubiously. “There will be no one within hearing, I hope?”

“Certainly not!” returned Madame de Pellé, in a tone that completely reassured him. “There is no one here but Madame Rosita and myself, and I shall be on the ground-floor.”

CHAPTER VI.

“SHALL I FIND HER AGAIN?”

WHEN Esmé Fielding stood on the threshold of *maman's* chamber he felt very much inclined to run downstairs again. But he called his manliness to his aid, as well as the strong desire for certain knowledge that had drawn his footsteps thither, and determined, now he had come, to go through with whatever might be before him.

So, though he turned rather pale at the sight of the old black woman huddled up in her armchair, he did not flinch, but went steadily forward.

“Is this Madame Rosita?” he inquired of his guide.

“Yes, sir! She is very aged, as you see, and perfectly blind; but she has the gift of double sight, and can tell you all you may wish to know. Take this chair, sir—so—and place your hand on hers—and please not to address her until she speaks to you!”

“You are *sure* there is no one within hearing?” inquired Mr. Fielding again.

"Quite sure!" replied Madame de Pellé, mendaciously, as she withdrew.

As soon as she was out of sight Mr. Fielding took the precaution of trying the handle of the door that led into the bedroom.

But Mrs. Arlington had already taken the precaution of locking it on the inside, so that he had no means of detecting the trick that had been played upon him.

He resumed his seat therefore, and again laid his hand on that of the negress.

"Cold—very cold!" she commenced to mutter, after a short pause, "cold in the heart, and calculating in the head! You wish to ask me about a woman, sir!"

"I do! How do you know that?"

"What else is there to interest you sufficiently to bring you all this way? Love and hate! love and hate! They make up the sum of human life! Let me consult the magic crystal!"

She fumbled for her piece of crystal as before, and placing it to her forehead, began to moan.

"Oh! the misery and trouble! How she suffers! There are two women here, standing opposite each other. Both proud. But one young, and the other old. And one with a warm heart, and the other

with a cold heart—cold, as marble—something like your own!”

“My heart is not cold!” commented the young man.

But she took no heed of him.

“You stand alone,” she continued, wrinkling up her withered brow, “and there is gold around you—a great deal of gold. And you bartered your honour for it! A manly thing to do!”

“You are rather hard on me, Madame Rosita!”

“Do you think so? The truth is generally hard. *She* found it so. It nearly broke her heart. But she patched it up with pride, and she left you. And you’ll never find her equal—*never!*”

“I know it! I feel it!” exclaimed Mr. Fielding. “And that is why I have come to you, *madame*. A friend of mine came here last week, and you told him some wonderful truths. I have laughed at such things hitherto, but I so much want to see her again—the young woman, you understand—that I determined to come and see if you could help me. Where is she? Where can I find her? I have tried every means I could think of in vain.”

“*Where is she?* Wait till the crystal speaks to me! Ha! I see her! In a large hall, or room, with many lights, and much talking and music. She is

alone. She talks and walks like the others, but she is quite alone—always—*always alone!*"

"Does she think of me?" asked the young man, eagerly. "Does she love me still?"

"The love is there still, but it is maimed, and bruised, and bleeding. It is dying slowly, weighed down by her pride, which lies on it like a heavy stone. It does not look to me as if it would ever breathe again. But it was strong once—very strong—and much too yielding."

"It shall be strong again!" exclaimed Mr. Fielding. "I felt that she had not forgotten me, although it is two years since we met. I *knew* that she was suffering for my loss!"

"And what have *you* suffered?" asked the old crone, in a cracked voice.

Esmé Fielding coloured.

"Do you doubt my suffering?" he said. "I gave her up at my mother's command. There was no other alternative, but it nearly broke my heart. And I feel now that the penalty is more than I deserved—that the misery has lasted long enough, and that I will break down every barrier that exists between us! Only tell me if I shall find her again!"

"Yes, you will find her; but I don't think you will keep her."

"*I will!* Let us but meet once more, and I am afraid of nothing. She never could resist me in the olden days. Why should she now? But can you give me no clearer clue to her address?"

"You need not trouble yourself to find it out; your fate will bring you together before long. The invisible thread that unites you is being drawn closer and closer; but there is a wrong between you—a cruel wrong—like a great knot in the way. If it cannot be untied, it cannot be cut."

"I will untie it; I will do everything in my power to make her happy. But are you *sure* you see her? Tell me what she's like that I may be certain you are right?"

"She is fair as the day; tall and slender as a lily, and she holds a lily in her hand. There is only one speck upon it—the shadow of your love; but it is almost hidden by the glory of her hair. She has wondrous hair—like threads of gold with sunshine playing on them, and it hangs below her waist. Do you recognize her?"

"Every feature—you describe her exactly. And we shall meet again? How soon?"

"When another moon has run its course. By night—in a public place—with the lights shining upon her hair. That is all—the vision is broken."

"Thank you a thousand times!" exclaimed Mr. Fielding, as he pressed a piece of gold into her withered palm; "you have told me all I want to know. Let me but find her, and I will do the rest for myself."

He passed from the chamber as he spoke, and down the stairs into the open air; and Mrs. Arlington, gazing after him furtively from the window, saw him stop when a few paces from the house, and taking out his handkerchief, wipe the dew from his excited brow. His face, turned upwards, was flushed and smiling. She had never seen the quiet, *non-chalant*, and somewhat affected Esmé Fielding look so radiant before. So he had a secret in his life like other people.

"Here's a pretty disclosure," she remarked, as she rejoined her family, "Esmé Fielding with a breaking heart! I wonder what his mother would say if she heard of it? He is her only child, and heir to an enormous property, and they say Mrs. Fielding wouldn't give her consent to his marriage on any account; and he is bound to obey her if he wants the money, as she can leave it as she chooses. *Maman*, can't you give me a clue to the girl?"

"I never give any clues. You shouldn't have listened to us," replied the old woman, pettishly.

“*Maman* is weary, Lolita; come away and let her rest,” said Madame de Pellé. “She may have to read the crystal again before to-night.”

“And you have nothing more to say to me, then?” observed Mrs. Arlington, carelessly, as she paused before *maman* and touched her hand.

“*Blood!*” exclaimed the crone, shrinking back a little, “*blood*. You should have been a Vaudoux. Remember, those who rule should be prompt. The time is passing—don’t waste it,” and then let her head sink upon her breast.

“She is tired; we must not try her any more,” said Claircine de Pellé, drawing her daughter from the room.

“And it is time that I should return too,” observed Mrs. Arlington, “or I shall not be back at the dinner-hour. Adieu, mother! My quarter’s salary will be due in a month, and then I will send you some more money. Meanwhile *maman* appears to be reaping a golden harvest. What did Mr. Fielding give her?”

“Only a sovereign. Ah! my child, they come in very slowly, and they last a very short time. And when shall I see you again?”

“That I cannot say. You see it is the season, and Mr. Kerrison is giving dinners almost every

day. He has friends this evening. You must not expect me too soon."

"And you will follow *maman's* advice?"

"I will try to do so," replied Mrs. Arlington, with a grimace, as she submitted to be embraced by her mother; and then, tying the thick veil over her face again, made her way rapidly to the station. As she was standing about Aldgate, waiting for the omnibus which should convey her to the West-end, she beheld, to her consternation, Colonel Escott. He was on the opposite side of the way, and at first she hoped he would not recognize her; but he evidently had good sight, for, after peering at her figure for a few moments, he crossed the road and approached her side.

"I thought I could not be mistaken in you," he said, as he lifted his hat from his head; "but who would have expected to meet you in Aldgate? It is a horrible place for a lady, so dusty and crowded. Are you going towards home?"

"Yes," she replied, smiling, as she remembered *maman's* injunction regarding him. "My duties often lead me into unpleasant places, Colonel Escott; but I am bound to fulfil them all the same."

"I am sure you would feel so. But now that they are concluded, may I escort you home? I was

just going to hail a hansom for myself, and shall be honoured by your sharing it. I have been to my City agents to learn the fate of some cases I dispatched to England before I started myself, but they have not yet arrived. Allow me," he continued, as he handed her into the cab as carefully as though she had been a duchess, and took a seat by her side.

"This is very comfortable," she remarked, presently, as she lay back on the cushions.

"You should never go about in anything less comfortable," said the Colonel, earnestly. "I cannot bear to think of a delicately-bred woman being jolted about in those clumsy omnibuses, and mixed up with all sorts of company. I remember once remarking to my old friend, Fielding——"

"To whom, sir?"

"Mr. Fielding. By the way, you must have seen his son, I fancy—young Esmé Fielding (my godson), for Mr. Kerrison tells me he knows him very well."

"Mr. Esmé Fielding is your godson, sir?"

"Certainly. I've never seen the lad since he was five years old; but I remember I had to fork out to the extent of a silver mug for him. Oh! yes; he is my godson, and a very promising young fellow I hear he is, too. By the way, he is in town,

and likely to look in upon us this evening. I had a letter from him to-day, in which he says he shall call if possible. I suppose he must be quite a man by this time."

Mrs. Arlington was silent.

She sat in the cab with a strange feeling creeping over her—a kind of presentiment that events were closing in that would some day circle her round. And it was not until the Colonel had rallied her on her lack of conversation that she roused herself sufficiently to say—still remembering *maman's* caution:

"Since he is *your* godson, Colonel Escott, you may be sure that Mr. Fielding will meet with every possible attention at my hands," and dismissed her cavalier, on their arrival at home, with a smile that set his pulses beating as if he had been twenty.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WHITE WOMAN.

It was not long before Colonel Escott had identified himself with most of Mark Kerrison's pursuits, and the friends were generally to be met together. To the Colonel the theatre, both by day and by night, was an especial and never-failing source of delight. It was a revelation—a new world to him! He was never tired of watching the spectacular displays, the mechanical effects, the realistic details which are put before the playgoer of the nineteenth century. To a man who remembered nothing better than the painted apology that did duty for scenery on our boards thirty years ago, the real water, live animals, cabs, trains, and fires that make the dramas of to-day so life-like, were a constant source of curiosity and interest.

Nor was the Colonel's wonder confined to the stage effects. The amount of intelligence displayed by the principal performers, and the military precision with which a band of rough children or

ignorant "supers" was drilled into the perfection of order, never failed to excite his admiration and his praise.

Mark Kerrison's new comedy, "Miss Credo," was in course of preparation at the Meridian, and meanwhile all other work was suspended, as he spent morning after morning superintending its rehearsal, always accompanied by his *fidus Achates* James Escott.

Mrs. Arlington had chosen to resent his long absences from the library, not in so many words indeed, but by downcast looks and heavy sighs, that had disagreeably startled him. He had not mentioned the occurrence to his friend; it was too slight, in fact, to make a fuss about even to himself; but certainly Mrs. Arlington had let him see very palpably of late that she sorely missed his presence in the house.

It commenced with only a reproachful look or two, and a depressing tone; but when it seemed to be advancing rapidly to tearful eyes and but half repressed sobs, Mark Kerrison took fright, and began to ask himself what it all meant. The thought haunted him for days, knitting his brow at rehearsal when nothing was going wrong, and making him thoughtful and uncommunicative when work was over.

The Colonel accused him of not being well, but Kerrison said he had never felt better in his life. Yet the unpleasant, mysterious doubt which Lola Arlington's behaviour had raised in his mind remained to worry him. He began to fear that he had spoiled her, placed her too much on an equality with himself, and she was commencing to resent his friendship with anyone else as a personal injury.

Mr. Kerrison's lips curved into a smile as the idea struck him. What an absurdity! He would have been wiser to have let her know what her position as his amanuensis was at once, and to have given her a fixed salary for her extra services, instead of requiting them as he had done, liberally but injudiciously, in trinkets and dresses, and similar luxuries.

He was thinking very seriously in this strain on one occasion as he drove to attend a rehearsal at the Meridian.

Mrs. Arlington had made her new mood almost offensively obtrusive that morning, having let an undeniable tear splash upon the writing-table as he stood by her, delivering his final orders. He was determined not to notice it. He thought if he did he should open the founts of some feminine grievance about the servants or the tradespeople which she

was quite competent to settle by herself. Or (the uncomfortable idea smote him) that she might intend to give him warning, either on Escott's account or for some other trivial reason, and *that* was a contingency he wished to postpone as long as possible. For, as he told himself whilst the Colonel and he drove to the Meridian together, what on earth he should do without the woman he could not possibly imagine. She had become his right hand in all literary affairs; she had learned exactly how to answer his business letters; she was clever enough to be able to read and pass a reliable opinion on the numerous manuscripts committed to his charge; she saved him a world of trouble in copying and correcting, and, even as he had told James Escott, she was able to help him with her perspicuity and judgment.

"No! by Jove, she *mus'n't* leave me!" he thought, with wrinkled brow. "I'll double her salary if she hints at such a thing. Surely she can never be so foolish as to dream of *marrying* again! *That* would be the cruellest blow of all. But even in that case I'll buy the fellow off if it takes half my income."

"You look worried this morning, Mark. What's up, old fellow?" exclaimed the cheery voice of Escott by his side.

"Nothing, Jem; only thinking out a situation. I don't like Bessie Reed's interpretation of the waif in 'Miss Credo;' there's too much sentimental prettiness about it. The girl thinks more of dressing herself than the part. I told McAdam to find someone else to fill it by to-day."

"It is easy enough, isn't it?"

"It is a small part, but not so easy to fill as you might imagine. The appearance has so much to do with it. I want a slight, delicate girl, with small features—not a blooming rustic. Reed will have to take the chambermaid instead."

As soon as they arrived at the theatre he attacked the stage-manager on the subject.

"Have you found someone to take the waif's part yet, Mr. McAdam?"

"Yes, sir, I think so. Miss Lily Power. She was at the Thalia last month. As far as appearance goes she'll look the part exactly."

"Where is she?"

"Waiting to see you in the green-room, Mr. Kerrison."

"Come along, Jem."

As the friends left the stage together one carpenter said to another:

"I expect that military gent is the one that has

all the money, and he's at t'other's back; else why should he come loafing round day after day in this fashion?"

Meanwhile Kerrison and the Colonel had entered the green room, at the farther end of which a young woman was sitting in the shadow.

"Miss Lily Power!" said the dramatist interrogatively.

"Yes," replied a low voice of singular beauty.

"Will you be so good as to come forward? I am Mr. Kerrison, and Mr. McAdam tells me you are a candidate for the waif in 'Miss Credo.'"

"I can play the part if you will trust me with it," she answered, walking to meet them.

As she halted and lifted her face to theirs, one thought flashed through both men's minds at the same time:

"Is she beautiful, or is she not?"

They saw before them a girl of perhaps two or three and twenty, but with a countenance so careworn, that it would better have suited middle age. Her complexion was of a pearly white, without any variation of colour; and her hair, which was of a pale gold, made her look still more bloodless.

Her eyes were magnificent—large, humid, and clear as crystal—of a soft gray tint, and shaded

with brows and lashes of a darker colour than her hair.

But here her charms seemed to terminate.

Her nose was ordinarily good. Her mouth might have been pretty, but its trembling lips were almost white. Her figure was excessively slight, almost fragile, and her stature was under the ordinary height of women.

She looked hysterical, nervous, and debilitated.

Kerrison fancied she was suffering from stage fright, but Escott thought she was insufficiently nourished. They were both wrong.

It was Lily Power's *heart* that was starving, rather than her body, and she feared herself more than she did any other human being. But she possessed the ideal face and figure for Mark Kerrison's "waif," and he recognized that at once.

"Miss Power," he exclaimed, after a critical survey, "you are the very lady I have been looking for. Have you ever played a boy's part before?"

A faint colour came into her waxen cheeks as she answered:

"No."

"Is it in your line?"

"I am only a beginner, Mr. Kerrison, and I am very poor. Anything that I can do is in my line."

Her intonation was so correct, it was evident she was a lady by birth; and her voice was so pathetic it aroused immediate interest.

Mark Kerrison made a few more remarks to her regarding his piece, and the character he wished her to assume, and then led her off in triumph to the stage, leaving James Escott in the green-room alone.

What was it in this stranger's voice that had awakened some sleeping memory of his past? What was it in the expression of her eyes that sent his thoughts flying back to that saddest episode of all his life, when he and the woman he loved stood face to face for the last time and said farewell?

He passed his hand thoughtfully across his brow, trying to solve the riddle for himself.

So had he seen poor Helen's eyes raised to his—with the same look of pathetic entreaty—of hopeless wondering loss—as she gave him up for ever.

As the truth struck him he started and sighed. He had not thought so much of Helen since he had been home. The salt water seemed to have washed away the last remnant of his regret for her. But the sight of Miss Power had revived it, and with impatience at the idea, and yet a sort of yearning to see if he was correct, he left the green-room and walked after her upon the stage.

He found her in the midst of her most important speech, reading it from the scrip, but with so much pathos and appreciation that the author was delighted, and could not say too much in her praise as soon as the rehearsal was concluded.

"That Miss Power is a very remarkable girl, Jem!" he observed, as they drove to the club together. "Her facial expression is excellent, and she has the true *larmes dans la voix*. I wonder McAdam didn't pick her up before. She's a gem, and will make a fine emotional actress by-and-by. And she is positively handsome! I thought her plain at first sight, but I found out my mistake when she began to speak. She has magnificent eyes, and hair down to her waist, so McAdam tells me. I call her a regular *find*!"

"Who is she?" demanded the Colonel.

"I can't discover; but she doesn't belong to any theatrical family. I suppose she is some nursery-governess or clergyman's daughter who is wise enough to prefer the stage to starvation. Heaps of them go on nowadays, but few have this girl's ability. I shall not lose sight of Miss Power. I shall have her trained for my emotional parts. That saint-like face of hers will draw double in the midst of a farcical comedy."

He could not forget the subject, even when he returned home for the evening, but discussed it openly, and without stint of praise, in the presence of Mrs. Arlington, who listened for some time in silent disgust.

At last she observed, inquisitively:

“A new *protégée* of yours, Mr. Kerrison?”

“A most promising *débutante*, who is about to appear in ‘Miss Credo,’ Mrs. Arlington. She plays Philip—you know the part—and she will look it to the very life.”

“I’ve not much opinion myself of a woman who will appear in public dressed as a *boy!*” replied Lola Arlington, with something of a sneer.

“That’s because you take the bigoted view of an outsider concerning such things!” returned Kerrison. “A woman’s character has nothing to do with her profession!”

“And I am sure if you saw Miss Power,” interposed the Colonel, eagerly, “that you could have none but a good opinion of her, Mrs. Arlington!”

“So *you* are going to play Saint George also in defence of this maiden, Colonel?” said the housekeeper, with compressed lips. “I conclude she must be very handsome to have enlisted two such gallant knights in her cause.”

Colonel Escott was annoyed, and said no more; but Mark Kerrison continued to dilate on the voice, gestures, and expression of the new actress, until Lola Arlington was beside herself with jealousy and chagrin.

She came off badly on all sides that evening, for Kerrison was so full of the chances for his comedy and the interpreter of the waif, that he never even asked her to sing a song, nor take a hand at cards; and Escott's heart was beating in dull time to a tune of long ago, and making him feel almost guilty to find that the notes sounded strange to him.

The advent of the stranger had had the power to stir the natures of both these men, although in different keys.

One—it was leading onward to the future! The other—it had driven back upon the past!

Nevertheless, the fact remained that Lily Power, and the thoughts and memories Lily Power had conjured up for them, occupied their minds until they retired to bed.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SUCCESSFUL WAIF.

MARK KERRISON'S interest in the new actress did not abate as the days went on, although he was careful to keep the fact a secret from his friend. On the contrary, it increased to such an extent that he became frightened at it himself, and used to rub his forehead thoughtfully, and wonder why he had never felt such anxiety to find himself in the presence of any woman before.

Escott appeared to like the girl; but Escott never said more than that she was a very interesting person, and the tones of her voice haunted him long after they had died away. For Lily Power certainly gained in every way upon acquaintance. Her face had a spiritual beauty about it, quite apart from any regularity of feature, and her manners were those of a gentlewoman—quiet, dignified, and refined.

Mark Kerrison had tried in various ways to show his estimation of her services, but without effect. He

had invited her to dinner at his house, and she had replied that she never went into society. He had asked leave to call upon her at her own residence, and her answer was that she never received visitors. He had even ventured to offer her a present, such as most girls in her position would have been charmed to receive, and she had rejected it as an insult.

Yet she was always at her post, faithfully doing her best with her part, and she improved in consequence every day. She would never be a brilliant performer perhaps; but she looked unusually sweet and pathetic in the character she had undertaken, and even Mr. McAdam said she was a very capable actress.

Kerrison did not tell his old chum the Colonel of the efforts he had made to gain Miss Power's confidence, nor of the rebuffs he had received. He felt ashamed of them somehow. He flung the bouquet she had refused to take from him into the street one night, and locked the bracelet with the diamond horseshoe somewhere away in his drawers, where he should never come across it again. Never had any former rebuffs rankled in his mind as these did. He found himself longing each night for the morning to arrive which should bring him to Miss Power's presence again; and when it dawned, no-

thing short of the gout would have kept him from the Meridian.

Never had a piece been better rehearsed than "Miss Credo." The author found something to amend each time he saw it, and would not let the company off duty for a single day. Of course Mr. Kerrison's continual absences and unusual fits of moodiness did not escape the notice of Mrs. Arlington. Colonel Escott was too blind to see any difference in his friend's demeanour, but the housekeeper knew all about it, and began to search for the cause.

At last the night for the production of "Miss Credo" arrived, and the household in Hyde Park Gardens was in a fever. Dinner had been ordered somewhat earlier for the occasion, and Esmé Fielding, who, notwithstanding his own apparent superficiality, had struck up a great friendship for his godfather—whom he termed "a jolly old innocent"—was one of the party.

"I go to most *first nights*," he observed, in the course of conversation; "but I don't know when I expected more pleasure than I do from 'Miss Credo.' The fact is, you two old foxes have been so sly about it that I believe you have quite a stock of pretty girls hidden away in the Meridian, with whom

you are going to dazzle the public. Now confess, Mr. Kerrison, don't you find my respected godfather here a terrible fellow behind the scenes? Isn't he always in some scrape or other? Haven't you had to rescue him a dozen times already?"

The Colonel took the accusation in perfect good faith, and denied it seriously.

"My dear Esmé, you cannot possibly mean what you say. I should be the last person to abuse Kerrison's trust in me after that fashion. Besides, I really never cared about girls. They are too frivolous to please me. If I ever thought of such a thing—which I assure you I have given up doing years and years ago—it would be in connection with some much older woman than I should meet behind the scenes of the Meridian. My friend Kerrison there will, I am sure, corroborate my opinion, that the conversation and manners of very young girls lose their flavour for men of a certain age. We prefer the sex ripened, like our wine."

"I am not quite so sure of that," replied Kerrison, a dull red mounting to his cheeks. "A girl's idle prattle is rather a relief after a hard day's work than otherwise. One doesn't want to go in for politics and domestic economy when one's brain

is tired. However, I have not had much experience of either."

"Nor I," laughed the Colonel, "nor ever mean to. Kerrison and I are two old bachelors, Esmé, vowed to celibacy to our lives' end. We leave marriage and all its cares to such youngsters as yourself, who have plenty of money and nothing to do with it."

Mr. Fielding's brow overcast.

"I am afraid I shall never have a chance of trying it, Colonel. My mother sets her face entirely against matrimony as far as I am concerned. She is queen-regnant at Applescourt, and she will allow of no meaner light near the throne on pain of my disinheritance. It's rather selfish, isn't it? But such is her decision."

"Well, you must prove you are independent of it," said the Colonel, cheerfully.

"How can I?"

"By working, my dear boy, like other men, and supporting your wife with your own hands. When you've met the girl you want to marry, go in and win her, and chuck the money to the winds. What's the good of money compared to love?"

"But I have never been brought up to do anything, you see," replied Esmé, looking down, and playing

with his knife and fork. "I am an only child, and naturally look forward to inheriting my parents' property. So that it would be rather a waste of time my bothering myself about work, when I might come into Applescourt any day—wouldn't it?"

"Perhaps so," rejoined the Colonel, in a tone of disappointment. "Well, then, you must do without a wife—that's all! And I don't suppose it will make much difference to you any way. The boys of the present day seem made of different stuff from what they were when I was young, and jeer at love, and home, and domestic happiness, and all the things we used to think sacred. So I daresay a bachelor's life will suit you best, Esmé, after all."

"At all events, until I come into my property," laughed the young man.

"That is another thing I find altered for the worse," remarked the Colonel. "In *my* day we used not to speak too lightly of the chances of our parents' deaths."

Esmé Fielding looked ashamed of himself then, and dropped the subject.

The kind-hearted Colonel feared he had been too hard on him, and hastened to introduce another.

"Where are you going to put Fielding and myself to-night, Mark?" he asked.

"In my box, as usual, Jem."

"I was in hopes we were to be behind the scenes!" exclaimed Esmé, looking up.

Mark Kerrison frowned.

"No strangers are allowed behind at the Meridian," he said, curtly.

"And where is Mrs. Arlington to sit? Is she coming with us?" inquired Escott.

"O, no! I have put her in the dress-circle. I did not know if it would be agreeable to you and Fielding!" replied Kerrison.

"*I* have not the least objection, nor can Esmé have, I am sure. Why, the box will hold half-a-dozen, Mark. Do let Mrs. Arlington join us, if it pleases her."

"Oh! don't let's have that woman!" exclaimed Mr. Fielding, deprecatingly. "I can't bear her! She looks like a murderess!"

The Colonel, gentle as was his disposition, could have murdered his god-son at that moment.

"Hush!" said Kerrison, warningly. "She will sit where I put her! It is better for all parties."

Then, their dinner being concluded, they rose from the table, and prepared for the evening's amusement.

"Miss Credo" went swimmingly from beginning to end, and proved a complete success.

Kerrison was, of course, behind the scenes all the time, directing, encouraging, and applauding, and Escott and Fielding occupied the stage-box.

The first thing the Colonel did on settling down, was to sweep the house with his glasses in search of Mrs. Arlington.

Presently he discovered her in the second row of the circle, looking glorious, as it struck him, in a black lace dress and yellow roses, but frowning ominously, and with her gaze steadfastly fixed upon the stage.

He fancied she was annoyed at her position, and he was sorry Mark had put her there. He had often heard her say she always occupied the author's box on first nights, and since she helped him so much with his work the Colonel thought she had every right to do so.

He should be miserable if his advent deprived this glorious woman of her privileges. He hoped so sincerely that she did not misconstrue his actions, or imagine his wishes had had anything to do with the change, and he determined in his own mind, to seek an early opportunity to let her know the truth.

Such were Colonel Escott's thoughts, whilst Lola Arlington sat with knitted brows regarding the stage, and perfectly oblivious of his presence.

And Mark Kerrison, behind the scenes, was hovering about Lily Power, and wondering why he felt so dumb when brought in contact with her.

She was looking wonderfully well in her waif's costume, but no amount of compliments seemed to bring a flush into her marble cheeks. Her face was white as alabaster, from the midst of which her luminous eyes shone like stars. Her beautiful hair was rolled away under a boy's wig of the same colour, and the ragged suit falling off her neck and chest displayed a skin smooth as ivory, and of the most dazzling fairness.

She had not much to do in the first and second acts, but she watched the piece throughout, and Kerrison felt as if he were bewitched, and could not move away from her side.

"I am all anxiety to see this new goddess of Mr. Kerrison's," said Esmé Fielding, as he consulted the play-bill. "*Miss Lily Power!* I have never heard the name before!"

"I daresay not. I understand she is quite a beginner," replied Escott. "But if you are expecting a beauty, Esmé, you will be disappointed. Miss Power's chief personal attraction lies in her fairness."

"I like fair women—the fairer the better for me,"

exclaimed the young man, with a quickly repressed sigh.

"Do you really *mean* that?" said the Colonel, elevating his brows. "How strange! To *me*, fair women seem so insipid. But here comes the lady and you can judge for yourself."

It was the third act where Lily Power had the first opportunity to show what she was made of. She had walked across the stage before, but she had never turned her face fully to the audience. Now came the moment of recognition, when she was compelled to come down to the footlights and deliver her best speech. As she half fell, half lay, before them, Colonel Escott recognized her prettiness.

"I have maligned the girl," he said to Esmé Fielding, over his shoulder. "She really looks beautiful to-night. I had no idea she was so handsome! What glorious eyes! And what a skin! It is white as snow. What do you think of her, my boy?" he continued, as he turned to the young man behind him.

But Mr. Fielding's face had become grey as ashes, and he was staring at Lily Power as though he saw a phantom.

"What's the matter, Esmé? Are you ill?"

He recovered himself with a ghastly smile.

“*Ill?* No! I was only admiring your beauty—Miss what’s her name—Lily Power?”

“But you recognize her! You have met her before!”

“How can you tell that, Colonel?”

“I read it in your face—anyone could see it.”

“Well, if you press me, I *have* met her before; but I’m sure I can’t tell where! At a dance, perhaps, or a supper-party. These actresses are all over the place, you know! But, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll just slip out for a moment. This theatre is intolerably hot to-night, and I have a headache. I’ll be back directly.”

He disappeared without giving his companion a chance to offer to accompany him, and rushed round to the box-office.

“I see a friend of mine upon the stage,” he said, hurriedly. “Miss Lily Power! Will you give me her private address?”

“It is against the rules, sir.”

“Will you send a note to her, then?”

“I cannot do that either; but there are plenty of messengers about who will carry it round to the stage-door for you.”

“Thanks for the hint.”

He procured a sheet of note-paper at the bar, and scribbling a few lines in pencil, despatched them to their destination, and, having swallowed a glass of brandy, returned with a very flushed face to the stage-box.

"Do you feel better?" inquired the Colonel.

"A little—but you'll forgive me if I run away as soon as the curtain is down. I feel as if I must get out to the fresh air."

Meanwhile the efforts of the waif had been loudly applauded, and the pathetic eyes and voice of the new actress had won her an easy road to public favour.

Kerrison was delighted with her success. He waited for her at the wings after each appearance, and complimented her warmly on her impersonation.

"If you will allow me," he said, at one time, "I will write a piece expressly for you, and give you the very best opportunity I can to make your name with the public."

"You do me too much honour, sir," replied Lily Power, gravely; "and I am afraid you overrate my abilities; but I am only too much flattered by your offer."

"Don't say that; you don't know how much I

would do to please you. May I offer you my carriage to return home in to-night?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Kerrison; your kindness might be misconstrued. It is better I should go by myself," she answered in the same grave tone.

But a few minutes afterwards she came to meet him with a hurried, anxious manner, at another part of the stage.

In her hand she held a crumpled paper, and her whole appearance was indicative of distress.

"Mr. Kerrison," she exclaimed, hastily, "you were good enough just now to offer to send me home in your carriage. Will you do more? Will you take me home yourself, and *at once?*"

She had so pertinaciously refused to give him her private address hitherto, that her proposal took him completely by surprise, and his pleasure was evinced in his face.

"Don't mistake me," she added, with her eyes raised to his; "I am only making a convenience of you. I have had a note from a person I once knew, and he says he shall wait for me at the stage-door to-night, and it frightens me, Mr. Kerrison. I *cannot* meet him—indeed I cannot! O! do take me away at once!"

Mark Kerrison's chivalry was instantly aroused.

"Tell me his name, Miss Power; I will see that he does not molest you!"

"No, no, I cannot! Only take me home without delay. I am quite ready, you see, and my part is over. I want to go now—*now*—directly before he can come round in search of me."

"My carriage is here; I will put you in it this moment," he said.

"And come with me," she pleaded, as she grasped his arm, and glanced fearfully around her.

He conducted her hastily through the passages to the stage-door—and, not waiting to answer the call that the audience were certain to make for him, jumped into the carriage after her, and drove off into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER IX.

GIVE ME YOUR LOVE.

MISS POWER occupied some dingy lodgings in the Waterloo road. As they reached the door, and Mr. Kerrison handed her out of her carriage, she said in a confused manner:

“You won’t come in, will you?”

And then, as though suddenly conscious of the rudeness implied in her words, she added, hastily:

“I mean, of course, you are welcome to do as you choose; but there is no reason I should trouble you further.”

But he only answered gravely:

“If I have your permission to do so, I will see you upstairs, as I have something to say to you.”

The door being opened by this time by an untidy, slip-shod servant, Lily Power led the way without further comment to her private apartments, which were dirty, comfortless, and in keeping with the remainder of the dwelling.

Arriving at this haven of unrest, she flung her-

self into a chair, and hiding her face in her hands, cried for a few moments hysterically.

Then she said, without daring to raise her eyes to his:

"What must you think of me, Mr. Kerrison? First, of my being so presumptuous as to enlist your services on my behalf; and secondly, of my breaking down like this. But I am tired, and excited, and not strong. You will forgive me, will you not?"

"Miss Power, I am ready to forgive you anything, on one condition—that you will permit me to help you out of your trouble!"

"But that is quite impossible! It lies too deep for any cure. O! Mr. Kerrison, what shall I do? I shall have to throw up my engagement at the Meridian—to leave the stage altogether, since this—this person has found me out! I never thought I should see him again. He will persecute me to death! If he doesn't leave London, I *must*!"

"But this is unbearable, Miss Power! Such tyranny is unheard of, and must not be allowed. Tell me the name of this man whose presence alarms you, and you shall never speak to him again."

"O, I cannot—*I cannot*!" she sobbed.

"Is he a relation of your family? Has he any authority over you?"

"Yes, in a measure. I could not make you understand how without telling you all. But I dare not remain in the same place with him!"

"Has he threatened you?"

"He threatens to find me out, and visit me."

"Have you not sufficient authority to keep out any person you may not wish to see?"

"Not *him*, I am afraid!" she answered, shuddering.

"Have you given your private address to anyone at the theatre?"

"Not yet."

"Refuse to do so, then. I know it is the rule to demand it, but I will explain the reason of your reticence to Mr. McAdam. If this person is unmanly enough to persecute you with letters take no notice of them, and he will soon leave off writing. He can only send them to the theatre?"

"But he will lie in wait for me, and follow me home, Mr. Kerrison."

"*I* will take care of that, Miss Power, if you will put yourself under my protection. I will send you home each night myself, and see that the stage-door entrance is cleared before you pass through it."

"How good you are to me, sir! The part of Philip is not worth so much as that."

"I am not thinking of your part now, but of yourself. Believe me that, if you will let me help you in this dilemma, it is *I* that shall incur the obligation rather than yourself."

She seemed to read something in his eyes then that startled her, for she stood upright, white as death and cold as marble.

"What right have I to trouble you like this, sir? I ought to know better. I am not in a position to accept an obligation from any man. I beg of you to let me thank you for your kindness, and to wish you good night."

"And there is no other way in which I can serve you, Miss Power?"

"There is no other way in which I can accept your services, Mr. Kerrison. You are a man of the world, sir. I need not point out to you that a young woman situated as I am and living by herself, dare not take a benefit from the hands of strangers."

"But when will you cease to look on me as a stranger? I have known you now for six weeks, but I have seen you a great many times. Are we never to be nearer friends than we are at present?"

"I hope we may be," she said in a low tone. "You have been very good to me, Mr. Kerrison,

and I should like to return your kindness—if it were possible.”

“It is more than possible, if you will choose to make it so. Miss Power, do not think me impertinent; but I cannot help seeing that you are poor and, it seems to me, friendless. Have you quarrelled with your friends?”

“I have none,” she answered, looking down.

“No friends!—no relations! You are an orphan then?”

“I am an orphan, sir.”

“Without brothers or sisters?”

“Without brothers or sisters.”

“Good Heavens!—at your age, and with your attractions! It is incredible. And in so perilous a profession too! What made you adopt it?”

“To put bread in my mouth, Mr. Kerrison; and to kill thought that was killing me.”

“My poor child! So sad and lonely, and yet you will not let *me* be your friend!”

“I think you *are* so, Mr. Kerrison; the best one, at least, that I possess.”

“Prove your belief by trusting me, Miss Power. Come and see me, and let us try to know more of one another.”

“But you are a single man, sir!”

"I am single, but I should not dream of asking you to visit me unless it were in the company of other ladies fitted to protect you. Besides, I have a widow lady to keep my house—a Mrs. Arlington—who is a sufficient *chaperon* in herself. Will you come, Miss Power?"

"Perhaps—some day. But I have no wish for society. It galls and irritates me! I am much better alone."

"I will not take that for a definite answer," said Mark Kerrison, as he offered her his hand; "but ask you again and again until you consent."

She tried to appear grateful for his attentions, but wished him "good-night" in a listless manner that showed that her thoughts were far away.

"You are *sure* no one followed the carriage, or is waiting about outside?" she asked in a fearful manner, as they parted.

"Quite sure; but I will take an extra look now on your account."

He passed out of the hall-door, but returned after a minute to whisper:

"The coast is quite clear; there is not a loiterer in sight. Good night!" And she echoed a grateful "good night" as he drove away.

Thoughts of her filled Mark Kerrison's mind as

he drove homeward. *Whom* did she fear? *Why* did she fear him? What power could any man hold over this innocent, harmless girl? But whatever it might be, he determined he would free her from it. It was terrible to think of a young creature like that living alone without friends or fortune, battling with poverty, and compelled to work for her bread, and hanging over all she did or said this shadow of a secret fear!

Kerrison remembering his ample income and his large empty house, sighed. How strange it seemed that one mortal should have so much in this world and another so little! How he wished that the rules of etiquette would permit him to make this young fellow-creature comfortable for ever, and beyond the reach of stint or care! But he knew it was impossible.

He was thinking thus and sighing over it, as many men have done before him, when he turned the latch-key and opened his own door. It was later than he had imagined. The time had flown on silver wings in Lily Power's presence, and the clock in the hall pointed to half-past one.

Mark Kerrison was still disencumbering himself of his overcoat and opera-hat, when a figure walked out of the library and confronted him. It was Mrs.

Arlington. He started as if he had seen an apparition—she took him so completely by surprise. He was always uncertain in his hours of returning home, and this was the first time that she had ever sat up for him. His first idea was that James Escott had been taken ill.

“Good Heavens! is that you, Mrs. Arlington?” he exclaimed. “Is there anything the matter with the Colonel?”

Mrs. Arlington looked annoyed.

“I really know nothing about the Colonel, Mr. Kerrison. He is not such an object of interest to me as he is to you. I sat up with a very different purpose. Because—because, I was too unhappy to sleep.”

She pronounced the last words with a falter in her voice which made Mark Kerrison look up sharply. He saw, then, that she was unusually pale and careworn in appearance, that her hair was in disorder, and her face was stained with tears.

“My dear woman!” he cried involuntarily, “what is the matter? Has anything occurred in my absence? Have you received any bad news?”

“No, no,” she answered, shaking her head, whilst a large tear rolled down either cheek. “It is nothing new. I am simply over-excited, and—and *miserable*.”

"Nonsense," returned Kerrison, stoutly; "you are tired—that's what it is. A first night is enough to tire anybody, and you ought to have been in bed long ago. Come along into the dining-room and have a brandy and soda. That's the thing to set you right again. I insist upon it," he continued, as she appeared to make a slight resistance, and he placed her arm within his own and dragged her in a friendly manner to the apartment he had indicated.

"There," he exclaimed, as he handed her the foaming mixture, "drink that to the continued success of 'Miss Credo!' Wasn't it splendid? Did you ever hear louder applause? Were you not proud of your share in it?"

But instead of pledging her employer and the new comedy, Mrs. Arlington laid her head down upon the table, and burst into tears.

Kerrison became annoyed. He felt no sympathy with this distress as he had done with that of Lily Power; it only worried and made him impatient.

"Now, now, now! what is this all about?" he asked petulantly. "You will wake the whole house, Mrs. Arlington, if you make such a noise. Has anything happened to annoy you? You cannot expect me to condole unless I know what I am to condole with."

"You would not understand if I answered you," she murmured.

"You do not give me credit for much sense. *Why* shouldn't I understand?"

"Because you are so blind—so *blind!* You cannot see—you never *have* seen all this time—that my heart—my heart—is *breaking!*"

"*Your—heart—is—breaking!*" repeated Mark Kerrison, utterly confounded.

"Breaking! Yes! My only wonder is that it has not broken long ago. But what do you care so long as your plays succeed—so long as the artists fulfil your expectations—you think nothing of the hand and the brain that have worked to help you! Any new fancy will make you forget *me!* Do you suppose, as I sat alone and neglected in the dress-circle this evening, watching the girl you take such an interest in, and are always lauding to the skies, that I didn't think where *she* would have been, and the play would have been, except for me! I do all the rough work, it is true, and you take all the credit. But I labour as much as yourself, and you have often said you could not do without me."

"I know I have, and I repeat it," replied Kerrison, with a perplexed brow. "You are of the greatest

value to me! When have I denied it to anybody? What have I done now to deserve these reproaches?"

"I am everything in the library," went on Mrs. Arlington, still sobbing; "but out of it I am *nothing*—nobody—only the *housekeeper!*" with a bitter stress upon the word. "And *why* do you suppose I have worked for you? *What* motive do you think I have had for my labour? What reward have I looked forward to?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said the dramatist, ruefully. "But if you think your services are underpaid, Lola, say so at once, and I will give you any salary you may require."

"*Give me your love,*" cried Mrs. Arlington, impetuously, as she pushed her hair off her face, and looked up at him with her large dark eyes.

CHAPTER X.

“I WILL DROWN MYSELF.”

IF Mrs. Arlington had asked Mark Kerrison to give her his house and furniture or his entire income, she could not have surprised him more. He almost staggered as her demand struck upon his ear; it appeared so supremely ridiculous. But then his mood changed under the supposition that the woman was hysterical, or over-excited, and he answered roughly—

“You don’t know what you are talking about! You had better go to bed before you say any more. You will be the first to laugh in the morning over the absurdity you have been guilty of.”

But Mrs. Arlington was not to be shaken off so easily. She had taken *maman’s* advice to let Mark Kerrison read the true state of her feelings regarding him, and what she had begun, however awkwardly, she intended to go through with. So she made no attempt to stir.

“Don’t send me from you!” she pleaded, with

those big eyes still fixed on his and making him feel exceedingly uncomfortable. "Let me tell you all that is in my heart. O, I did not mean to say so much, believe me. It slipped from me unawares. I had been waiting for you so long. Your unexpected kindness made me forget myself."

Mark Kerrison passed his hands through his gray hair thoughtfully.

"I don't quite understand you," he said, in a tone of annoyance. "You speak as if I had in some way or other neglected you—as if I were not habitually mindful of your claims upon my attention. Is this the case, Mrs. Arlington? Is there anything in the treatment you receive in this house, either at my hands or those of my servants, that you wish altered? Is there any comfort you have been denied? It is quite a reproach to me to see you in tears of the cause of which I am completely ignorant."

"O, have I not told you?" she cried. "Is their meaning not plain enough? Do you think it is possible for a woman with my appreciation for genius and every good thing that can attend it, to live month after month under the same roof with a man like yourself and not feel her soul knit to his own? Do you think I can follow the workings of your talent, from its first embryo thought to its final

success, without feeling myself, as it were, incorporated with it, and part of the great plan from beginning to end? And yet I am nothing to you—*nothing*.”

Mr. Kerrison, although growing more uneasy with every word she uttered, fought bravely under the banner of miscomprehension, and professed to be totally ignorant of her real meaning.

“I feel flattered by your opinion,” he answered, gently. “No man could feel otherwise. I am glad, too, to think that you derive a certain pleasure from co-operation with my work. But I am afraid you over-rate my powers. I am a successful dramatist, but not a genius. I hold the public to-day, and to-morrow they may hiss me off the stage. Still, whilst I *do* hold them I am very sensible of your appreciation of my work, and grateful for the assistance you give me in it.”

“You *will* not understand me!” exclaimed Mrs. Arlington. “O, Mr. Kerrison, it is more than that. I *must* unbosom myself whatever you may think of me. Why—*why* have you drawn me to you with a magnetic chain that I cannot break? Why have you wound the fibres of my heart around your own until they cannot be uprooted without they wither and die? Why have you let me live in close association with you for months and even years, since after all

you have no warmer feeling for me than a cold and meagre sense of duty? I wish you had killed me first! I wish I was dead and buried at this moment, and gone out of sight and sound for ever!"

And Lola Arlington abandoned herself anew to her despair. There was no mistaking her meaning now, and Mark Kerrison stood by her with compressed lips and a darkening brow. What man ever liked a woman the better for letting him openly see that she loves him? He may affect to return her feelings for the sake of flattered vanity or his own purposes; but he despises her when he is alone, and no protestations he may make to the contrary are true exponents of his mind. As the full meaning of Lola Arlington's confession broke on Kerrison's comprehension he experienced an unconquerable distaste and loathing for her presumption and lack of modesty. But his vanity stepped in to save her from too merciless a scourge. After all it was a compliment she had paid him, and the poor woman (so he argued with himself) could not be held responsible for her feelings. But his voice was very stern and decided as he answered:

"I cannot recall what I have done since you have lived under my roof, Mrs. Arlington, to entitle me to any reproaches on your part. I am not aware

that I ever failed to treat you with deference and respect, or that my conduct has been such as to give you the slightest grounds for forming any expectations on your own account. Can you remind me of any one instance in which I have forgotten what is due to you and myself, or by which I have raised hopes in your mind which I have omitted to fulfil?"

"O, never—never! You have always been too good and generous to me. Had it not been so, I might never have formed this fatal attachment, which can only end with my life. O, Mr. Kerrison, have you no pity for me?" she continued, growing bolder in her despair as she grasped his arm. "Say that you will not despise me for my weakness—that you will remember I am only a woman, and let me return to the duties I have taken so much pleasure in for your sake, and I will perform them more faithfully than ever if you will sometimes give a thought of compassion to my loneliness and my empty, *empty* heart!"

The cunning jade believed that he would gladly take advantage of the compromise she offered then and there, so as to get her out of his sight and give himself time to think over the wonderful revelation she had made to him. And with most men (so long as they are not in love with somebody else) to ponder

over the confession of a woman's love for them is to make them return it—after a fashion of their own. But she was little prepared for Mark Kerrison's collected reply:

"Mrs. Arlington, you must know that what you ask is not in my power to comply with. I am very sorry indeed for what has taken place to-night—more sorry than I can tell you—and had I known what was coming I would have prevented it by every means at my command. But what is said is said, and you must feel it can lead but to one result—our separation."

"O, no—*no!*" cried the housekeeper, startled beyond measure by the decision of his manner; "don't say *that*, Mr. Kerrison. I cannot leave you! What necessity is there for it? You may rely on my not mentioning this subject again. Why cannot everything go on as it did before?"

"That is quite impossible," he replied, gravely, "and a sensible woman cannot fail to see it. You have broken down a barrier between us to-night, with your plain speaking, that must prevent the old relations being ever renewed between us. How could I consult with you about such a paltry thing as dinner, or set you your task of copying, knowing all the while——No, no; it is impossible! It is your

own doing, Lola. It is you that have cut the tie between us, but you have done it most effectually, and the sooner we part the better. You know that I am not ungenerous, and will take care that you lose nothing, in a monetary sense, from the suddenness of the rupture. You have known me long enough, I hope, to trust me with that; but I should wish you to leave to-morrow."

"So soon—so soon!" she sobbed, with her face hidden from him.

"Certainly. What use is there in your remaining? Each moment will only be a prolonged torture for both of us. We cannot look in each other's faces without remembering this unfortunate revelation."

"You shall never look into mine again!" exclaimed Lola, passionately, as she started to her feet, "for I will drown myself before the morning's light."

She rushed towards the front door as she spoke, with a feint of leaving the house, but Kerrison seized her by the arm and held her back.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she screamed, as she struggled with him. "You turn me out of your house, after years of communion and friendship, just—just because, in a moment of misery and weak-

ness, I have showed you my heart; and I will not survive the shame and the disgrace! Why shouldn't I end my life? What use is it to me without you? Let me go, I say!"

Kerrison was thoroughly alarmed by her violence. He thought she was going out of her mind, and that the household would be roused and made the confidants of her unlucky passion for himself.

"Lola! Lola!" he said, soothingly, "don't be so hasty! Listen to me. I cannot and I *will* not allow you to leave my house to-night. You are not in a fit condition to go anywhere, except to your bed. Try and calm yourself, and if you really care for me, do as I say. Go upstairs, and try to sleep, and in the morning we will talk over this matter again. Will you do this *to please me?* I ask it as a favour. I am deeply sensible of the honour your feelings do me, Lola, and what I said just now I said for *your* sake, not my own. But drop the subject till to-morrow, and let me see you go quietly up to bed—*for my sake, Lola!*"

He laid so much stress upon the accentuated syllables that she thought it wiser to comply with his request. Indeed, she had never had the slightest intention of drowning herself, or even of walking about the streets bareheaded.

Her *ruse* had had the effect she intended, and she was enabled to give in gracefully.

"For *your* sake, then," she whispered, gaspingly, as she commenced to toil laboriously up the stairs, leaving him at the foot.

When she had mounted three or four, she turned, with a smile of heavenly sweetness breaking through her tears, and held out her hand to him in silence.

She looked so like a repentant Magdalen as she did so, that, notwithstanding his new-born flame for Lily Power, Mr. Kerrison could not do less than take it, and convey it to his lips.

Then Mrs. Arlington walked slowly up the remainder of the stairs, and turned another watery smile upon him before she disappeared from view, leaving him in such a state of perplexity and annoyance as he had seldom experienced before.

What was he to do about this most unpleasant matter? That was the question that worried him for the remainder of the night.

To lose Mrs. Arlington was to lose the mainstay and prop of his establishment. He had told her very promptly that she must leave the house the following day, but what he should do if she took him at his word, he dared not even think. In the middle of the season, too! it would be impossible to

replace her! And supposing he could get a house-keeper to take charge of such vulgar necessities as dining, and cleaning, and engaging servants, who would help him with his literary labours?

He had tried half-a-dozen assistants without success before he hit on Mrs. Arlington. He was not a man who could get on with everybody. Some people worried and irritated him; others drove him wild by their slowness and stupidity; and with none but herself had he ever felt free to think aloud. To the suggestions of no other had he ever listened with patience or any sense of sympathy. If she left him half his ability would go with her. He must have been a dolt ever to propose such a thing! At all hazards, he could not part with Mrs. Arlington!

Then, again, would it be fair of him to part with her against her own consent? His home had been her home for some time past. He had considered her settled there for life. She was a widow without any private means, and, as far as he knew, without any family of her own to fall back upon for support in time of need. She was not fitted for every sort of situation. He had lifted her somewhat above her original sphere by associating her with his work. Would it be manly, or generous, to throw her back upon it, for no fault of her own? For,

after all—and at this point vanity stepped in to aid the woman's cause—when all was said and done, what *was* her crime? A foolish, overweening fancy for himself. It was ridiculous and inconvenient, but it was not criminal; and if it were, *he* was the last person who should visit it upon her head.

Mark Kerrison lay awake through the livelong night, ruminating on the position, and the decision he arrived at was, to speak openly to Mrs. Arlington the following morning, and see if they could not come to a compromise. They would both be calmer by that time, and able to argue the matter from a common-sense point of view. Yet his hand and voice shook considerably when, breakfast being over on the succeeding day, he rang his library bell, and desired the footman to tell Mrs. Arlington that he wished to speak to her.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LADY-SECRETARY.

AFTER a significant delay of a few minutes she appeared, looking very nervous, very pale, and with her eyes cast down to the ground. She did not advance into the room either, but stood at the door like a servant, waiting until she was spoken to.

"Please come in and sit down, Mrs. Arlington," said Kerrison, trying to speak in his usual tone. "It is very warm to-day, is it not? And you do not look to me as if you had had sufficient rest. Why did you not remain in your own room a little longer? I should not have asked to speak to you unless I had heard you moving about."

"I have my household duties to perform, sir, and I hope I shall not neglect them—as long as I remain here," she answered, in a low voice.

"That is just what I want to talk to you about," resumed her employer. "I don't think we were either of us *quite* ourselves last night, Mrs. Arlington, and we said several things we had better have

left unsaid. Shall we try and forget what passed between us? Is it a bargain?"

"You may be sure I shall never renew the subject, Mr. Kerrison."

"Of course not! We will neither of us ever refer to it again. That is plainly understood. You were over-tired and excited, and I daresay you hardly remember what you did say; neither do I. We talked a lot of nonsense about separation, but I don't think that step would benefit one of us more than the other. I should lose an invaluable ally, and you would give up a home that is, at least I hope, a comfortable one to you. What do you say?"

"It would be a life-long blow to me, sir."

"Very well; then let us consider the idea abandoned and for ever. But whilst we are on this subject, Mrs. Arlington," continued Kerrison, glancing towards the door to be sure it was shut, "and we have agreed it is mooted for the last time, perhaps we had better speak to each other without reserve. If our connection is to be continued, you fully understand, I hope, that it will be on the old footing of—what shall we say?—author and amanuensis."

"I understand, sir, fully," rejoined Mrs. Arlington, rather bitterly.

"You see, my dear Lola," said Mark Kerrison,

venturing on a little soothing process now that he had settled the main point, "I am *not* a marrying man, and the sooner my friends recognize that fact the better. I consider I am past changing my condition in life, and it is a very good thing for the women that I am. I don't think I should make a good husband—not even a pleasant one. You see me at my best, for I have a habit of shutting myself up when I feel unfit for company. But I am very morose and gloomy at times, and then I am a caution I can assure you."

"All persons who work their brains much are subject to periodical fits of depression," observed Mrs. Arlington.

"Then they are better left alone, my dear lady, until they come out of their sulks again. Heaven forbid I should depreciate the kind indulgence of my friends! for no man is more dependent than myself on affection and sympathy; but I am not fitted to form a nearer tie than friendship. I should lose instead of gain, on a closer inspection. I am too much wedded to my own habits and customs to be able to break through them without detriment to my temper and disposition. Do I make myself plain to you?"

"Quite plain, sir."

"The terms on which we have worked together hitherto appear to me to be the only ones on which the sexes can approach each other, and keep clear of the dissensions which invariably follow a closer intimacy. You have always been ready to give up your time or your pleasure to meet my convenience; and I have sometimes, I think, made similar little sacrifices for you."

"Indeed you have, Mr. Kerrison. You have always treated me most generously and considerately. I acknowledged as much to you last night."

"Pooh! pooh! We mustn't refer to last night, remember. It is buried henceforth as in the depths of the sea. I want only to talk to you of the future. Do you intend to remain with me or not?"

"It must be just as *you* please, sir."

"You know I should wish it to be so, under the conditions I have mentioned—namely, that all things go on just as they did before. But with regard to yourself—would it make you happier to go?"

"O, Mr. Kerrison! how can you put such a question to me?" said Mrs. Arlington, with an intonation that made him hurry on with his next sentence.

"Very good, then, that is settled; you will remain with me. But is there anything more I can do to mark my appreciation of your services? You

have your own sitting-room—is it sufficient? Would you like to have a writing-room apart from this? Will you feel more comfortable to occupy a separate room from mine? Speak out—don't be bashful. We need have no secrets from one another."

"Then I would rather remain here, sir."

"Very well; and for the future, Mrs. Arlington, we will change your designation and call you my lady-secretary. You will still take the charge of my establishment, and be my housekeeper; but my friend Escott and I have been talking the matter over, and we think that the higher title is more befitting your station in life. If it is in accordance with your own feelings also, I shall be glad if you will take your meals for the future at our table. This will place you at once in your proper position with the ladies who may chance to honour me by dining here. I suppose you will have no objection?"

No objection! By the rich colour that mantled in her face at the idea, he might have seen if she had any objection to it.

If Lola Arlington had been asked what balm would best soothe her lacerated feelings of the night before, she could not have chosen one better fitted for the purpose. To discard the name of housekeeper, which had always seemed to place her on a

level with the servants' hall, and adopt that of lady-secretary, with the privilege of sharing the meals of her employer, gratified all the ambition which his repulse had left her. Hope returned to her bosom. Whilst she had access to his presence she would not despair, and her eyes glowed with renewed pleasure.

"O, sir, you are too good to me! I confess that my position here has galled me sometimes—just for a little—and had it not been for—for—certain circumstances I should have thrown it up long ago. It was so new and strange, you will understand, after having had a house of my own; but my poverty left me no choice."

"Of course, poor thing! I knew that, and I have felt it all along, but it was difficult to make any change whilst I was alone. You are too handsome, you know, to be dining *tête-à-tête* with a bachelor, however old; but now that the Colonel lives with me, it is different. People will not talk so much. It will make an increase in your salary too, naturally, but we will settle that next pay-day. And now, since we have made up our little difference and laid our plans for the future, I should advise you to go upstairs and lie down and rest yourself, for you are certainly not fit for any work to-day."

"Indeed, *indeed* I am, if you will only let me."

"No, I will not let you. Besides I am thinking out something, and want the library to myself. So good-bye for the present, Mrs. Arlington, and remember that Escott and I shall expect to see you at the dinner-table this evening."

But, left to his reflections, Kerrison looked rather perplexed, and could not decide in his own mind whether he had acted quite judiciously or not. It was true that Colonel Escott and he had talked over the advisability of raising Mrs. Arlington's position in the household. It did not seem quite the correct thing that the housekeeper should spend half her time in her master's library, helping him with his work. But there would be nothing strange in the fact of his lady-secretary undertaking to direct his household into the bargain.

Escott, under the influence of his admiration for Mrs. Arlington, had naturally argued strongly in her cause, and Mark Kerrison had seen the reason of it. But the revelation of the night before should have shown him it would be a mistake. However, his own convenience, and a laudable desire to soothe the woman's wounded vanity, had made him propose the change, and now it was too late to repent it. But he doubted if he had been wise. Another thing troubled him. In order to justify his behaviour

to Lola Arlington, he had told her he was not a marrying man, and would never change his condition in life.

It was what he had been in the habit of saying for years past, and a month ago he would have repeated it over and over again, without compunction. But to-day, somehow, the remembrance made him uneasy, and he found himself wondering what the new lady-secretary would do or say, if he ever changed his mind. Would she throw it in his teeth, or consider he had broken some sort of a compact he had entered into with herself?

For Mr. Kerrison was very conscious that his thoughts had been drawn of late, far oftener than was necessary, in the direction of Lily Power; and that this pale, reserved, and mysterious sort of girl was taking a hold upon his mind that alarmed him. He had been gradually awakening to the truth for some weeks past, but since Lola Arlington's confession he had been sure of it.

What else was it but a heart already fixed in another direction, that had made him turn, almost with loathing, from the pleading of a young and handsome woman for his love?

Why did her flashing eyes revolt him? Her dark hair and crimson lips appear to possess no

beauty? Only—because his fancy at that moment was riveted on a slight, fragile form, and pensive eyes that shone through tears like wood-violets bathed in dew. Only—because a white face, with quivering, pale-tinted lips, had taken possession of his heart without his knowing it, and all riper charms looked coarse and uninviting beside the image enshrined there. And in assuring Mrs. Arlington of his entire freedom, both in the present and the future, he seemed to have put a fetter on his actions, and pledged himself to a life which every hour was becoming more distasteful to him. He was still ruminating over what had passed between them, when Colonel Escott's tap sounded on the door.

“Quite alone, my dear Mark?” he asked, peeping in.

“Quite so, Jem. By the way, old fellow, I have just been talking to Mrs. Arlington about the little alteration you suggested in her nomenclature the other day, and she is quite pleased with the idea. So we decided that for the future she is to be my lady-secretary, who is good enough to include the superintendence of my household amongst her duties, and that she will take her meals at the same table as ourselves. Will that satisfy you?”

The Colonel's honest face beamed with pleasure.

"My dear Mark, I really think it is the right thing to do. It seemed a shame to me that a woman with such manners, and such a mind, should be placed on a level with an upper servant. She was so out of her place, too. And I am sure it will make our meals much more agreeable to have her sitting at the table with us, instead of hovering in and out of the room, as she was in the custom of doing. It makes me nervous to have a woman waiting on me. I think the change will be altogether for the better."

"Well, if *you're* content, old boy, *I am*; and now you are here to look after us, we will hope it may give rise to no scandal. I think she will be useful as a chaperon for my young-lady guests. It is sometimes awkward to secure the presence of a married woman when you want one. I was thinking of giving an entertainment shortly to the 'Miss Credo' company. I think it would be a graceful acknowledgment of their success last night. They all played remarkably well, didn't they?"

"Remarkably; especially your *protégée*, the waif. She came out quite strong in the last act. I had no idea she had it in her!"

"She did well enough," replied Kerrison, with

affected carelessness, as he turned over the newspapers that lay upon his table. "But of course Emily Hartlebury carried off the honours. She is the best comedy actress I know."

"We enjoyed it all through, Esmé and I," said the Colonel, "but I was quite sorry to see Mrs. Arlington in the dress-circle; I fancied she felt it. She should have been in your box, Mark. I wonder you didn't put her there."

Kerrison shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I suppose now that she is transformed into the 'lady-secretary,' she will claim a seat there for the future? However, she had nothing to complain of; she had an excellent view of the stage. By the way, did Fielding return here with you last night?"

"No; he wasn't very well, and left me as soon as we found you had no intention of responding to the cries for 'author.' By the way, Mark, why didn't you turn up? I was quite disappointed at your defalcation. The audience was so very enthusiastic, it seemed quite ungracious not to respond to their demand."

"I was called away on business in another direction, and did not get home till half-past one," replied Kerrison, with an averted face. "Besides, I

don't care for appearing before the curtain, Jem, and always avoid it if I can. Tenniel does just as well. I suppose he apologized for my absence?"

"O, yes; everything was done *en règle*, but it was a long time before they left off shouting. It was an exciting scene. I felt quite tired after it, and went to bed as soon as I came home. When will your 'Miss Credo' dinner come off?"

"Next week, I hope, but don't say anything about it, Jem; we may as well keep it to ourselves. I don't want the place overrun by a lot of men; the few we may require to make up the party I can bring home from the club."

"All right, old fellow, I won't mention it to anybody," replied the Colonel, who looked unaccountably cheerful at the news he had heard.

CHAPTER XII.

"QUEEN LILY AND ROSE IN ONE."

MARK KERRISON'S self-constituted guardianship of Miss Power effected its object so far as that young lady's freedom from molestation was concerned, but it did not pass without comment in the theatre. Each night he conducted her to her cab

himself, or sent her under the charge of some trustworthy person, who was bound previously to ascertain that no one was hanging about the stage door likely to approach or speak to her.

Esmé Fielding, therefore, although on several occasions he was lurking round the corner to try and obtain a private interview, was never bold enough to run the risk of a public refusal, especially as Mr. Kerrison was so often her attendant cavalier.

This constant solicitude on the part of the dramatist for the young actress's safety was not altogether interpreted to her credit. Men who have reached the top of the tree, and become wealthy and powerful, do not often patronize young and obscure girls from motives of charity and benevolence.

Yet Miss Power was so pale and undesirous of attracting attention, that few persons recognized the depth of her beauty; and so quiet and reserved, that fewer still would have accused her of flirting. The pursuit was universally allowed to be on Kerrison's side only, and he was credited with poor taste for his pains; but he went on his way, unheeding public opinion, and was fain to confess to himself that, the oftener he saw and conversed with Lily Power, the stronger hold she took on his imagina-

tion, and the more her image haunted him when she was away.

Of course his theatrical dinner had been organized entirely with the view of securing her company amongst the rest, but it was a long time before he could persuade her to accept the invitation.

"I never go out *anywhere*, Mr. Kerrison—indeed I do not," she pleaded, in excuse for her refusal—"I do not care for society, and I am not fit for it."

"How can you say such a thing, when you are fitted to fill the highest niche it could afford you!"

"You say that because you do not know me. If you met me in company, you would see how shy and timid I am, and how foolishly silent. I can never find anything to say to strangers."

"And yet you are completely at your ease upon the stage."

"That is a different thing; I cannot see my audience, or hardly distinguish one face from another. When I am playing I feel quite alone—or rather, I do not feel that I am there at all—I seem to go away for the time being, and the 'waif' is too much occupied with his own troubles to leave me any time to think of mine."

"You have the spirit of a true artist!" exclaimed

Kerrison, delightedly, "and you interpret the character to the life. How long have you been on the stage, Miss Power?"

"Not long," she said, evasively.

"You must have had a great deal of practice as an amateur."

"I don't think I did."

"Forgive my curiosity, but have none of your family been upon the stage?"

"None, Mr. Kerrison; but please don't speak to me of my family; they are mostly dead, and would rise from their graves, if they could, to reproach me with what they would consider my degradation. Had my parents lived," she continued, in a choking voice—— "But there, let us talk of something else."

Mark Kerrison laid his hand in sympathy on hers.

She did not start nor draw it away. The girl seemed to have outlived the lesser feelings of humanity, but she never responded to his attentions in any way.

"We will talk, then, of my little party," he replied, cheerfully; "it is to be quite a family affair, and you *must* join us."

"Who is to be there?"

"Only the 'Miss Credo' company—that is, Emily Hartlebury, Nelly Nevins, Mrs. Forbes, and I hope yourself, with Jack Armstrong, and Dudley Amory. My lady-secretary, Mrs. Arlington, a very charming person, will be of the party, and my old friend, Colonel Escott, and myself. Nothing very formidable, you see. Only the same faces you meet every night at the Meridian."

"You are *sure* there will be no one else?" she said, nervously.

"Quite sure, unless I bring a club man or two to fill up vacant places. I wouldn't ask you to a large party, knowing how you dislike publicity; but this little gathering will consist really of only ourselves."

"And you very much wish me to be present, Mr. Kerrison?" she asked wistfully.

"Very much indeed—more than I dare tell you! The affair will be a complete failure to me without you!"

"In that case I will come. You have been so good and kind to me, and I have no way by which I can express my gratitude except by complying with your wishes. But I am afraid I shall be a very stupid guest—a kind of female Banquo at the feast, and you will regret that you did not ask someone else instead of me!"

When the evening arrived, however, and she stood in Mark Kerrison's drawing-room amongst the other women, she was the fairest of them all. Mrs. Arlington, in black lace and artificial flowers, looked coarse beside her—Emily Hartlebury, vulgar and over-rouged—little Nellie Nevins, insipid—and Mrs. Forbes, wrinkled and old.

Miss Power was the plainest dressed amongst them—many would have said she was the plainest in appearance. But she looked like a lily amongst cabbage-roses.

She wore a white dress of some clinging material, made high to the throat, and hanging in straight folds to her feet.

Her golden hair was coiled round her shapely little head till it crowned it like a nimbus. Her face was guiltless of powder or of rouge. Her complexion was colourless, but clear. Her lips were tinged with a faint flush of pink like the inside of a sea-shell, and the dark lashes of her pensive eyes swept her cheek. She was very reticent and shy at first, as she had feared she would be.

Mark Kerrison, to avoid comment, placed her under the charge of Colonel Escott, whilst he devoted himself to the brilliant Emily Hartlebury.

But the honest Colonel found his companion very

difficult to draw out. He was not yet sufficiently *au fait* with theatrical matters to be able to converse with her fluently on the topics that might be supposed to interest her most, and she did not help him out a whit.

At last the dinner was announced.

"What's become of those men?" cried Kerrison, impatiently.

Jack Armstrong had disappointed him at the last moment, and so, to make the numbers even, he had invited Captain Riley and Esmé Fielding to join the party, an invitation to which they had responded readily, although they did not know who they were to meet.

But their clocks were evidently slower than Kerrison's, and they were not in Hyde Park Gardens at the dinner-hour.

"Give them five minutes' grace," pleaded Escott; and so Kerrison fumed through five minutes more, and then, presenting his arm to Miss Hartlebury, who was, according to theatrical reckoning, the highest lady there, he conducted her to the dinner-table.

It was laid out with perfect taste. Mrs. Arlington understood thoroughly how things should be

done, and Mark Kerrison had aided her on this occasion with his advice.

The centre piece was a huge block of ice on a silver *plateau*, embosomed in hot-house ferns, which cast a delicious coolness on all around.

Before each lady's plate too, in American fashion, was a spray of flowers artistically arranged for wearing in the dress, and chosen with a view to the taste or complexion of each fair guest.

Emily Hartlebury had a spray of stephanotis and geranium; Nelly Nevins, blue forget-me-nots and pink acacia; Mrs. Arlington, deep crimson roses; and Mrs. Forbes, Neapolitan violets and camelias. But in front of Lily Power's seat at Mr. Kerrison's right hand was a little bunch of pure white lilies resting on their waxen leaves, and beside it a long gold pin with a pearl of value at its head.

She took it up, wonderingly.

“It is not *real*?” she said, inquiringly.

Mr. Kerrison shook his head, and answered, in a low voice:

“No! no! Merely a little souvenir of the evening to fasten your lilies with. Are you vexed because I choose something for you so pure and simple? It was only because I thought them like yourself—as modest and bashful—and—and—*sweet!*”

He almost whispered the word amidst the bustle of the guests subsiding into their seats; but Lola Arlington, sitting on the opposite side of the table, noted his looks, and did not forget them.

The soup was not dismissed before the defalcant visitors were heard in the hall.

"Here are our truants!" exclaimed Mark Kerri-son. "It is really more than they deserve to find the dinner so little advanced.

"Hullo, Riley! Hullo, Fielding!" he continued, as the two men entered the room and commenced to make a thousand apologies for being late, "we've nearly finished, but I think you're in time for the cheese. It would serve you right not to introduce you at this late hour, but I am afraid that would punish the innocent with the guilty. These ladies you have seen before, though not quite so close, perhaps. Miss Hartlebury, Miss Nevins, Mrs. Forbes, Mrs. Arlington, and Miss Lily Power," he continued, rattling off their names like an acquired lesson, "Captain Riley, Mr. Esmé Fielding."

Miss Power started so violently as he pronounced the last word, that he eagerly asked her what was the matter.

"Nothing — nothing whatever," she answered, quickly, "only—I have pricked myself with this pin."

"I am so sorry. It is awkwardly long, I am afraid. Will you let me try and fasten it for you?"

She did not make the faintest objection. She seemed to have lost the power of speech, as he fumbled in his masculine fashion over the refractory little instrument, and finally succeeded in running it for about half an inch into her flesh. But he noted how she trembled the while he bent over her, and how her bosom heaved and palpitated as if she had lost all command of herself; and he interpreted these symptoms of feminine weakness according to his own wishes, and fully believed she was agitated by his proximity.

Meanwhile, Esmé Fielding stood stiff and upright, like a soldier sentenced to be shot, and gazed at her. It had been the one desire of his heart to meet this woman again, but he had little thought the meeting was so near.

Lola Arlington, regarding his strange attitude and the girl's confusion, and remembering the prophecy she had overheard *maman* utter through the locked door, took in the whole situation at a glance. Here was the white woman who was to be met first in a crowd. In a moment the secret which each heart believed to be its own was her property, and she had resolved to fathom it to the lowest depth.

Lily Power was the woman, consequently Lily Power was the first, apparently, to recover her self-possession, and she made the prick she had received from the pearl pin an occasion for bantering her host upon his awkwardness.

"Really, Mr. Kerrison. You have half stabbed me to the heart. That pin of yours is a veritable stiletto. May I not try a shorter and a humbler one?"

"I shall be very much distressed if you do. I have set my mind on your wearing this. Won't you oblige me?" he said, in a low voice.

"Certainly, if you wish it. But I must put it in myself," she answered, as she again bent over her dress and tried to hide her face in her flowers.

"Fielding, my dear fellow, when are you going to sit down?" exclaimed Kerrison, suddenly alive to a neglect of his guests; "that is your seat opposite your godpapa. I placed him there so that he might keep you in good order, that is, if he can spare any time from his next-door neighbour."

The Colonel, who was becoming quite at home with the fair sex, answered brightly that he had certainly no leisure to look after god-sons with a lady each side of him, and Esmé must be left to his own devices for that evening only, by particular desire.

The young man was evidently not ready with one of his usual sallies, for he seated himself in silence, and glared in an imbecile manner at the servants as they whispered the name of one *hors d'œuvre* after another into his ear. He was almost stunned by the sudden *rencontre*.

Although he knew that Kerrison was acquainted with all the members of the "Miss Credo" company, he had had no idea he was invited to meet them, and Lily Power's unexpected presence acted on him like a spell.

He ate and drank mechanically. The voices of the assembled guests seemed to him far away as the voices in a dream, whilst his thoughts flew back into the past, and reviewed the happy hours which he had spent by this woman's side before the world and Mammon had combined to separate them. Mrs. Arlington noted his confusion and Miss Power's pallid silence, and put her own interpretation on them. The secret which had upset *his* life was the same secret that had made *her* thin, and pale, and uncommunicative. It lay between those two. She was certain they had met before.

"Fielding, my dear fellow, you are not enjoying your dinner," rang out the host's cheery voice. "Edward, champagne to Mr. Fielding. Will you

take champagne, my dear boy, or moselle? Why, what's come to you? Have you lost money, or got a new pair of boots on? If it were not so late in the season I should certainly say you had backed the loser. I never saw you so glum."

"I have backed the winner and lost upon it before now, Mr. Kerrison," replied the young man. "But it was an old loss that was pressing on my mind just then, not a new one."

"Well, my boy, whichever it is you must drop it for this evening, for it is an insult to 'Miss Credo.' You were there on our first night, and I am sure you will join me in a bumper to her continued success, and that of all the talented ladies and gentlemen who have made her what she is."

"Hear, hear!" cried Captain Riley.

"I drink to the health of 'Miss Credo,' and the lilies and roses that made her," said Fielding, raising the wine to his lips.

"And to Miss Lily Power, 'queen lily and rose in one,'" quoted Kerrison, with more enthusiasm than prudence, as he followed his example.

The names of the various artists were mentioned one after the other, and congratulations and compliments accompanied each toast.

Only one woman at the table was left out—Mrs.

Arlington. Colonel Escott fancied she looked hurt at the omission, and he could not bear that she should feel herself slighted. He waited till the cheering and enthusiasm had died away, and then he said, bashfully:

"I would like to give you one more toast, Mark, if you have no objection. There is a lady present who interests herself keenly in your work, and rejoices unreservedly in your success. From a dramatic point of view she is not perhaps the rose, but she has been near it. And in herself she is rose enough to attract the notice of any nightingale. You must know I allude to Mrs. Arlington, and I am sure the gentlemen will join me in drinking her health, and wishing her all prosperity for the zeal she displays in carrying out your wishes."

Mark Kerrison did not quite like this little speech. It looked as though he had forgotten his duty to one of his guests. But he tore his eyes away for the moment from Lily Power, and murmuring:

"Yes! yes! of course; you're quite right, Jem. Your very good health, Mrs. Arlington," drank the toast in a hurried, indifferent manner, and immediately recommenced his attentions to his fair neighbour.

Lola sat, dark and glowering with indignation, at the head of the table.

What avail to her were Colonel Escott's honied speeches and pretty flatteries, whilst Mark Kerrison was engrossed by Lily Power? It was no palliation in her eyes that Miss Power sat silent and reserved by his side, and did not seem to be paying heed to a single word he uttered.

She would have liked to strike that pale, indifferent girl dead at her feet, for having the power to engross his thoughts to the exclusion of everyone else. But she thought she saw an opening for her revenge, though as yet in a glass darkly, and she knew where the information was to be acquired which should make the rough places plain.

She made the signal for the ladies to retire, with a malicious anticipation of the moment when she would be able to give her rival one or two sword-thrusts to carry home with her, but Miss Power did not afford her an opportunity to carry out her benevolent intentions. By an almost supernatural effort of will she had passed through the cruel ordeal of dinner without displaying one sign of distress; but as soon as the immediate necessity for self-control was over she broke down like a frightened child.

"I am ill, Mrs. Arlington," she exclaimed, as soon as the women found themselves alone; "I have hardly been able to sit through my dinner. I must ask you to let me return home at once."

"*Ill!* dear?" echoed Miss Hartlebury; "why, what's the matter? You don't look any paler than usual; you never have any colour, you know."

"Nevertheless, I am not well enough to remain here any longer," rejoined Miss Power, coldly, "and I must beg Mrs. Arlington to let one of the servants call me a cab."

"But you had better try some remedy first. Let me send for Mr. Kerrison," suggested Mrs. Arlington, with a sneer; "he is sure to do you good."

Lily Power sank down into a chair, apparently overwhelmed by their opposition; and the house-keeper began to consider what the consequences might be, if she were really taken ill in the house, and established there as Mr. Kerrison's guest.

"I *must* go home," murmured the girl, faintly; "I cannot hold up my head. I am unfit for anything but solitude and rest."

"Well of course if you must, you *must*," acquiesced Mrs. Arlington, as she rang the bell, and gave the servant orders to call a cab for Miss Power,

"but I am afraid Mr. Kerrison will be very much vexed with me for letting you go."

"I cannot help it. Please make my excuses, I shall be better to-morrow," said the girl, in broken sentences, as she hurried through the hall.

But Lola Arlington took care to accompany her to the vehicle, and listen to the given address.

"What number did you say, Miss Power?" she inquired, sweetly, after Lily had spoken to the driver through the trap; "he can't hear you."

And the girl, who suspected no collusion, and had but one prominent desire—to get away before Esmé Fielding should enter the drawing-room—answered, deliberately:

"Three hundred and twenty-eight, Waterloo Road, and please tell him to drive as quickly as he can."

CHAPTER XIII.

"YOU ARE A REAL WITCH."

THE remarks passed by the other women upon Lily Power, as soon as her back was turned, were tinged with as much charity as is usually displayed by the female sex towards one of its own gender.

"A mysterious illness," said Mrs. Arlington, meaningly, as she returned to the drawing-room; "I saw no signs of it at the dinner-table."

"Nor I," acquiesced Emily Hartlebury. "In fact, I thought the 'flat-fish' (that's our nickname for her in the theatre, Mrs. Arlington, because she's such a wet blanket) was looking uncommonly lively this evening. If I thought her clever enough to flirt I should have said she was flirting with Mr. Kerri-son."

"Clever enough!" sneered Nelly Nevins; "she's clever enough for *that*, you may take my word for it, and a good deal more. I always suspect those very quiet, mousey, saint-like creatures, who consider rouge wicked and lip-salve an abomination. She's no more ill than I am. She's had her dinner and she's got another appointment. That's about the length of it."

"I think it goes deeper than that," replied Mrs. Arlington. "I observed her manner completely changed when those two gentlemen came into the room. I fancy they have met before, though I don't know why that fact should have any effect upon her."

"There's something not altogether above board in Miss Power. She is too reticent about her affairs.

No one knows anything about her antecedents. I suspect she is a woman with a history," croaked old Mrs. Forbes (whose own histories, had they been written, would have filled a library), "and I don't like to see such people received in good society. One never knows with whom one is associating."

"Pooh!" cried Miss Hartlebury, "she's not handsome enough to have a history. Ugly, pale-faced dab! No more expression in her face than in a table. I don't know what Mr. Kerrison can see in her!"

"O! his interest in Miss Power lies wholly in the fact that she looks like a half-starved beggar on the stage," laughed Mrs. Arlington, anxious to believe what she affirmed.

"I am not so sure of that," responded Miss Nevins. "Everybody's talking of it at the Meridian, and my belief is she's no better than she should be."

Lola Arlington was still biting her lips and fuming over this remark when the gentlemen came noisily into the drawing-room. Mark Kerrison's eyes made a tour over the apartment at once in search of his divinity.

"Why, where is Miss Power?" he exclaimed.

"Miss Power was not well, and has returned home, Mr. Kerrison," replied Mrs. Arlington, coldly.

The consternation depicted on all the masculine faces at this intelligence made her frown, but she particularly noted the start with which Esmé Fielding received it.

"*Not well!*" repeated Kerrison, "what was the matter with her? Why didn't you send for a doctor? Why didn't you tell me? Surely you never let her go *alone?*"

"She insisted upon it, Mr. Kerrison. These ladies are witness that I begged Miss Power to remain here and let me send for advice, but she would have her own way. She said all she wanted was to get home."

"But she may faint on the road. There may be no one to look after her when she arrives at her house. I really think someone ought to follow and inquire if she is safe," said Mark Kerrison, with a look of distress.

He was longing to go himself, but he hardly knew how to accomplish it. Here were three other lady guests dependent on him for attention and hospitality. He could not be so rude as to leave them to amuse themselves whilst he ran after Miss Power. But his annoyance was very patent to all present.

"*She'll* do well enough, Mr. Kerrison," remarked

Miss Hartlebury, tossing her head, "you needn't look so miserable about it. She is one of those sickly girls who have always an ache of some sort or other on hand. I daresay she's bilious. She said she'd be all right to-morrow."

"But it is so strange—so sudden—a lady leaving my house in this way. I don't like it at all," replied Kerrison, wiping the heat from his brow. "I think Mrs. Arlington should at least have persuaded Miss Power to lie down for an hour or so before she went home. The doubt we are in concerning her will spoil our evening."

"Really, Mr. Kerrison, *I* am not to blame," said Mrs. Arlington, in an offended tone. "Miss Power is evidently a young lady who likes her own way, and she refused to listen to anything I said. But since you are so anxious to hear if she has reached home in safety, why do you not ask one of these gentlemen to go and ascertain for you? It would not take more than half-an-hour to drive to the Waterloo Road and back. I am sure Mr. Fielding would be obliging enough to go if he were asked."

"That I will with pleasure!" exclaimed Esmé Fielding, quickly.

"No, no," replied Kerrison, "I will trouble no one here. I can easily send a messenger to inquire

after her if the ladies will excuse me for a few minutes." And bowing, he left the room.

Everybody looked at everybody as he disappeared. Mrs. Arlington shrugged her shapely shoulders expressively, and Emily Hartlebury observed that Miss Power might be Venus newly-risen from the sea by the fuss that was made over her. The men stood about in uncomfortable attitudes awaiting the return of their host, and conversation seemed at a standstill. Esmé Fielding commenced to examine the ornaments and pictures, and worked his way round the room until he found himself near the sofa on which Mrs. Arlington reclined. Whereupon he dropped leisurely into a seat by her side and whispered, with a languid drawl:

"Anything *really* the matter, do you think, Mrs. Arlington, with this mysterious Miss What's-her-name—Lily Power?"

"I don't think it was illness at all, Mr. Fielding, if you ask my opinion, although I could not venture to say so before Mr. Kerrison. I believe something had upset her."

Esmé Fielding flushed at the remark, but professed to ignore it.

"By Jove! But that's not likely, is it? Unless Kerrison said something to her during dinner."

"O, no! I don't think it was anything *Mr. Kerrison* said, Mr. Fielding," Mrs. Arlington answered, in a low tone, as she glanced at him. "I'm a bit of a witch, you must know, and can read people's thoughts better than *that* comes to."

"Do you mean you can read mine?"

"I fancy I know more than you imagine. And one thing is, that this is not the first time you have met Miss Power."

His dark eyes opened to their uttermost.

"By Jove! How ever did you guess that?"

"I have guessed more. I think you have been very anxious to meet her again."

"Mrs. Arlington," he said suddenly, "can you give me her address?"

"Of course I can. Three hundred and twenty-eight, Waterloo Road. I have never been there, but I know it is where she lives."

"You are a real friend," he said, as he transcribed the address in his memorandum-book. "I don't know how to thank you enough. I would rather not have it talked of, you understand; but I did know Lily—Miss Power as she calls herself—a long time ago, and have been wishing to renew my acquaintance. Do you know if she lives alone?"

"I do not. I have never heard Mr. Kerrison say.

But the young ladies here call her a mysterious personage, and therefore I conclude she lives by herself."

"One word more, Mrs. Arlington. Is there any truth in the rumour that Mr. Kerrison is her acknowledged admirer?"

At this question his companion's face glowed with indignation.

"No; certainly not. How wicked people are to say such things! What should a man of his age want with a young girl like that? It would be folly—madness! Besides, he is not a marrying man. He never intends to change his condition. He told me so only the other day."

"Ah!" sighed Fielding, "so many men make good resolutions until the temptation occurs to break them."

"You think it would be a temptation then?"

"I think it *might* be so to some men," he answered, flushing.

"Mr. Fielding, excuse my saying so, but I think you would prefer that Mr. Kerrison did *not* yield to this particular temptation."

"To tell you the truth, I would."

"Then put it out of his power by being first in the field—or rather, since you have been there already——"

"I have been there already!" he repeated after her, wonderingly.

"Yes. Since you have been there already, re-establish your influence to the exclusion of any other. You have so many advantages on your side, you cannot possibly fear Mr. Kerrison for a rival."

"You are a real witch!" replied Esmé Fielding, admiringly.

But at that moment Mark Kerrison re-entered the room, and the conversation subsided, after which the evening passed far less pleasantly than it had been expected to do.

The ladies chattered, and sang, and flirted, and did their very best to make the time fly; but over all their merriment hung the shadow of their host's depression, and no one was sorry when the moment came for saying good-night.

The messenger to Waterloo Road had returned before then with a pencilled note to the effect that Miss Power had a violent headache, but hoped to be better after a little rest. But in reality the rest was long in coming.

Hours after her companions of the evening had driven off to their respective homes, and forgotten the incident that had disturbed their merry-making in sleep, Lily Power lay wide awake, staring into the

darkness, and wondering what the issue of that night's *rencontre* would be. She had met him again. She had stood face to face, although she had never raised her eyes to his, with the man who had made the misery of her life—from whom it had been her effort for twelve months past to hide herself.

She had left her home and changed her name, and entered a profession where she believed he would never dream of looking for her. And yet it had been all in vain, and Fate had brought their troubled streams of life once more side by side.

What would be the next move on the chess-board of her destiny? Would Esmé Fielding, spite of the silence with which she had treated the note he sent her at the theatre, follow her to her home and force an entrance there? Would he compel her, in self-defence, to appeal to strangers for protection against his insults—necessitate her harrowing up her feelings by a review of his past conduct to her, and a repetition of the sentiments with which they parted, as she believed, for ever?

The poor child shook and shivered as she lay on her coverlet that burning night in June, and anticipated the trial that was before her. But Esmé Fielding did not give her much time for speculation or suspense.

She had hardly finished her modest meal the following morning, when, without any warning, the door of her sitting-room burst open, and the man who had made and marred the world for her stood within the threshold.

CHAPTER XIV.

“I HAVE *NOT* FORGOTTEN.”

LILY POWER did not start or scream as she recognized her visitor, but she rose suddenly to her feet and stood holding on to the back of the chair, with her breast heaving, and her eyes staring as though she saw someone newly risen from the dead.

“Lily!” said Esmé Fielding, imploringly—
“Lily!——”

He moved a step nearer as he spoke, and the action seemed to restore her powers of speech.

“Don’t approach me!” she exclaimed, shuddering. “Don’t touch me, for I could not bear it!”

“O, Lily!—don’t be so hard on me!”

“Why are you here?” she asked, without heeding his last remark. “Why cannot you leave me to live out the remnant of my life in peace? My silence

must have told you how little I desired to look on you again."

"But *I* cannot exist away from *you!*" exclaimed the young man, passionately. "I have tried to tear your image from my heart, Lily, but it is in vain. Everywhere I see you—hear you—feel you. The world is empty for me since you have ceased to fill it with your presence. You were my life! I have not lived, in the true sense of the word, since we parted!"

"You should have thought of that before," she answered, coldly. "Time was when I could have said the same—when I *did* say it! But all the answer I received was to find myself thrust out upon the world, without home, or means. I have survived it all. I have outlived my foolish despair. I have even made a sort of home for myself. And I have but one desire respecting the past—to forget everything and everybody connected with it. Leave me to do that in my own way."

Esmé Fielding sank into a chair, and covered his face with his hands.

"*I cannot,*" he said, "the thought of what you may have suffered or undergone for my sake has made my life a misery! I have spent the last twelve months in wandering about and looking for you; my

home has lost all its pleasure and interest for me. I cannot bear the name of Applescourt since you have left it."

"That seems a pity," she answered, sarcastically, "since you bartered your peace of mind and mine for its possible possession. It should be doubly valuable to you now."

"I did not barter you for that. Don't make me out so mean," he exclaimed. "I gave you up in deference to my mother's strict prohibition; I thought that my duty to her——"

"Stop, Esmé Fielding," said the girl, interrupting his passionate disclaimer, "don't deceive yourself, or try to deceive me, with so paltry a subterfuge. Your mother bade you choose between her goodwill and me, and you chose to let me go. I do not blame you now. I have outlived the pain, and I can better appreciate the policy of your decision; but don't call your self-interest by the sacred name of filial piety. Had your mother been a poor woman and I a rich one, you would not have hesitated to reverse your choice."

"How can you believe me to be so mercenary? If you would only hear me speak!" he pleaded.

"I do not wish to hear you! I have listened to you too often already; and nothing you can say can

undo the past! You know how innocent—how humble I was—when I first entered your mother's house as her companion. I am of as good birth as yourself; but I should as soon have dreamt of stealing as lifting my eyes to her son. But you came across me, and you taught me to love you; you persevered for weeks and months until you had won my affection in return. And then, when the time of trouble came, in that supreme moment, when you should have stood up for me before the world—you disowned me!"

A low groan from Esmé Fielding was all the answer she received.

"Shall I ever forget that night," she went on, vehemently, her pale features lit up with indignation, "when your cruel mother, having found out the truth, taunted and reviled me until I dared her to send for you, and let me abide by your decision. I believed in you then, Esmé, I believed, too, in my fellow-creatures. I thought that when men told women they were all the world to them, and they might trust themselves without fear to their honour, they meant that they would stand up for them and protect them against slander, and insult, and cruelty. But you undeceived me thoroughly. You cannot be surprised that my eyes are open now!"

"Go on," he murmured; "you cannot say anything more bitter than you are saying."

"Have you forgotten, then, what followed? Do you want your memory refreshed?" continued Lily, panting as she spoke. "To be reminded how you answered Mrs. Fielding's summons, and when she accused you of loving me, and told you to choose between *her* affection and *her* property, and *her* fortune, and the miserable girl whom you had taught to trust in you—you chose your mother's *money*, and let me be turned out of my situation to make my way in the world as best I could?"

"No—no, Lily! you are too hard on me. It was not so bad as that," exclaimed Esmé Fielding, starting from his position. "You know I have no fortune of my own. I had not, at that time, even an allowance. How, then, could I have possibly cast in my lot with yours? My mother threatened me with disinheritance if I did not let you go; and so I felt compelled, for *your* sake as well as my own, to accede to her demands, in hopes that my concession might be the means of my helping you in the future. And it has proved so. When my mother felt convinced I was in earnest she settled a regular allowance on me, and I have employed it in searching for you ever since. It is not a very liberal one,

but it is sufficient for our needs—sufficient, at least, to absolve you from the necessity of appearing on the public stage to earn your living. O! how it hurt me to see you there! The shock nearly stunned me. I had been seeking for you high and low, but naturally under the name you held whilst with us. Had it not been for the change, I should have found you long ago. But *now*—now that I have the happiness of seeing you again—tell me that the miserable past is forgiven and forgotten."

"*Forgotten?*" repeated Miss Power, bitterly. "That is how men talk. They behave falsely, faithlessly, meanly to us; but the moment it pleases them to return, they expect us to forgive and forget. No, Mr. Fielding, I have *not* forgotten—I never *shall* forget. You had better understand that at once."

"I will *make* you do so, Lily. I will remind you of those happy days at Applescourt, when we were all in all to one another, until your heart yearns to taste the bliss of love again. I will talk to you of the sweet summer nights when we wandered through the woods and fields together, and the balmy mornings when we rose in time to brush the dew from off the grass—so loth were we to lose one moment of each other's presence—until you cry 'Come back, Esmé—come back, dear days and nights, and let me

live that life of love again!' and you *will* say it, Lily, will you not?"

It would seem almost as if she were ready to say it, from the tears that filled her eyes, but still she shook her head resolutely.

"No—no! you are quite mistaken. We were happy—there is no doubt of it—but it was a foolish happiness; and the bursting of the bubble made us wise. At least it has made *me* so; and the world can never be again what it has been."

"Let us grant that, then!" exclaimed Esmé Fielding, "and agree to make the best of what remains. I cannot let you stay upon the stage, Lily. It is not a fit place for you."

"I have no alternative."

"Don't say that. Have I not just told you that my mother makes me an allowance of five hundred a year. Whilst I retain it there is no occasion for you to work for your living."

"Thanks; but I should not care to live on Mrs. Fielding's money."

"It is not Mrs. Fielding's! It is mine! And I offer it to you! Come back to me, Lily, and share it."

The girl seemed to consider for a moment whilst she regarded him steadfastly.

Then she uttered, slowly:

"In what capacity?"

"How can you ask? As my wife—the solace of——"

"You wish to marry me, then?" she exclaimed, interrupting him.

Esmé Fielding flushed a deep red.

"Of course, after my mother's death. You would not doubt my honour, or that I should do you justice when it lay in my power, Lily? But just at the moment, you know, it would be impossible. They would be sure to hear of it at home, and every hope I have for the future would be ruined. You understand the reason there would be for a little delay, don't you?"

Lily said nothing, but pointed with her finger at the door.

"What do you mean?" said Mr. Fielding, looking round.

"*Go!*" she articulated, after a momentary effort. "There is the door—*go!*"

"But, Lily, my dearest girl, hear me——"

"*Go!*" she repeated. "You have insulted me with your presence long enough. I should not have been so weak as to listen to a single word from you! I should have known, from bitter experience, how this interview would end, I know there are

some women in whose natures the affections play so large a part that they can stand being humiliated, and mortified, and trodden on, and still condone the offence from the impossibility of tearing the offender from their heart. But that is not the case with me, Esmé. I loved you—ah! Heaven!” cried the unhappy girl, suddenly breaking down, “I loved you till I sacrificed the world for you, and thought it nothing—*nothing* in comparison with the bliss of knowing that you loved me in return. But now—it is quite different. I cannot see you without thinking of that night when your mother stood between us, and you turned your face away from me. It is only by Heaven’s mercy that I did not take my own life from the pain you gave me. And now, even if Applescourt and all your prospective wealth were in your own possession, and you came and laid them at my feet with the name of ‘*wife*’ I don’t think I should take them! I am sure if I did that they could never wipe off the stain that rests upon you in my sight. And so *you*, who did not think me worthy to be your wife—*you* I do not think worthy to be my husband. That is all. You had better know the truth at once, and trouble me no further. I beg of you to go, and never to seek me again—here or elsewhere—for I will not even offer you my hand!”

"Lily, I cannot—I will not believe it!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet and approaching her side.

The old negress's prediction had been running in his mind throughout the interview, and he remembered she had said that love, though maimed and bleeding, was hidden in the white woman's heart for him, and he thought if he made a bold assault on it that he would still win her.

"I *know* you love me!" he said confidently; "every word, every tone, tells me so; and I will never leave you alone until you confess it."

"You intend to persecute me then?"

"Don't call it persecution; say that I mean to persevere, at all risks, until I gain my end. You were mine once, Lily. I can shut my eyes and see, in fancy, your golden head upon my breast—feel your hand clasped in mine—gaze into your eyes, and——"

"*Stop!*" cried the girl, vehemently; "stop! I will hear no more. I have given you my final answer, and each further word you utter is another insult. I *was* yours—Heaven forgive you that the tense is in the past—but I *am* yours no longer; and I never shall be yours again. Do you understand me now? My love for you is dead and buried—

cold, motionless, and silent! Nothing you can say or do will ever make it live again! I despise you—I hate you—I renounce you! These are my last words; now that you have heard them, there is nothing more to stay for.”

He seized his hat and cane.

“I obey you, Miss Power, and I will go. But do not imagine, because you choose to renounce me now, that I shall ever forget what we have been to one another; on the contrary, whilst a chance remains of my success, I shall never cease to plead my cause with you.”

“Then you will force me to appeal to my friends to protect me against your intrusion.”

“You will hardly do that I think, whilst a memory of Applescourt remains. I may have offended you—I know I have—but that cannot undo the past. Don’t forget how often you have promised to be only mine!”

“That was when I believed you to be true. Your conduct since then released me from all protestations of fidelity.”

“But your heart has not released you any more than mine; and I shall yet live to hear you say so. Farewell, Lily. This is not the last time we shall meet.”

He passed from her sight with a confident and self-possessed air; but the old negress's words—*"You will find her, but you will not keep her"*—were ringing in his ears as he did so.

As for Lily Power, she stood where he had left her—pale, silent, and trembling—with the tears fast gathering in her eyes and rolling down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XV.

"WILL YOU BE MY WIFE?"

DID she love him, or did she not?

She could not have answered the question with any certainty, even to herself.

There were moments when, remembering all they had been to one another, she felt that the world was nothing to her in comparison with Esmé Fielding, and that she would bear any contumely or disgrace only to find herself once more by his side.

But these moments were few and far between. They occurred only when she was physically weak, with her nerves overstrung, and her spirits at a low ebb. Far oftener she thought of him as she had seen and heard him last—with an averted face and

a stammering tongue, and a general aspect of fear and self-excuse.

She was still standing and thinking thus when a tap sounded on her door. Believing it to be the servant, she averted her face and said, "Come in."

The door opened, and, to her consternation, revealed Mr. Kerrison.

There was no time to conceal her tears. She was compelled to brush them hastily away and turn to greet him.

He was shocked to see her careworn and distressed appearance.

"Are you sure I am not intruding?" he demanded, gently. "I asked for you, and the servant told me to walk upstairs. But I have come too early. You have not finished your breakfast."

"I have quite finished, thank you. Pray sit down. It is I who should apologize for such an untidy room; but I have not been very well, and I rose late this morning."

"It is to inquire after your health, as you may suppose, that I am here. We were so concerned to find you had to leave us last evening; and I am afraid you are not much better to-day," said Mark Kerrison, as he regarded her earnestly. "I don't like to see those tear-stained cheeks and red eyes."

Will you think me impertinent if I ask you to confide your trouble to me, and let me see if I can help you out of it?"

At these words the girl's tears welled up afresh.

"You are very, very kind, Mr. Kerrison, and your sympathy is a comfort to me; but your help must end there. My distress is purely of a private nature. No one can relieve me of it, and it is best not alluded to."

"I did not mean to be inquisitive," said Mark Kerrison, "but I feel a great interest in you, Miss Power, and all that concerns you. It seems so unnatural that a young creature like yourself should live alone. There must be so many hours when you need companionship and solace."

"Not many," she answered, smiling faintly through her tears. "You forget how *exigeant* you are with regard to rehearsals, and how many morning performances 'Miss Credo' promises to require. Besides, you must give me credit for occasional study. I want to improve vastly before you entrust me with another part. Your generous praise makes me fearful lest I should not continue to deserve it."

"But you might be taken ill in these lonely lodgings, without a soul to nurse you or look after you. You *were* taken ill last night, and had to re-

turn home and remain through the long hours of darkness alone. I could not sleep for thinking of it. It seems terrible to me. I wish you had some one to live with you."

"My dear Mr. Kerrison, I would much rather be alone. I am not a sociable person, and the constant presence of another woman would worry and irritate me. When people are poor they cannot get away from one another; that is the unpleasant part of it to me."

Mark Kerrison began to fidget on his chair. He had not come there with any more serious intention than that of asking after Lily Power's health; but as he noted the evident distress she had passed through, and took in the lack of comfort displayed in her surroundings, the thoughts that had haunted him lately rose to the surface, and threatened to influence his tongue. For Lily Power was looking especially interesting that morning. The second-rate furniture and meagre breakfast-table seemed to add to, instead of detracting from, her charms. She stood in the midst of them, in her white morning-wrapper, like her namesake flower in the rank corner of a kitchen-garden.

With her delicately-chiselled features, her luminous eyes, her pale gold hair, and her alabaster skin,

she looked like the incarnation of purity. No one, to see her, would ever have imagined she could feel the force of a consuming passion, far less that she had suffered it to scorch and wither up the very springs of her life.

There are some men for whom such statuesque temperaments express the ideal of womanhood, and Mark Kerrison was one of them.

"I believe," he said, after a long pause, "that you once told me, Miss Power, you have no relations living."

"It is true. I have no relations; that is, none whom I consider such, or who wish me so to consider them."

"Ah! that is too often the case in this world. 'A little more than kin and less than kind.' I have experienced it myself. When I was a lad I relinquished the army for the stage, and all my family cut me in consequence. As soon as I had made a name for myself they offered to be friends again. I rejected their proposals with scorn! I hate such hypocrisy! But a man is so much better able to look after himself than a woman. *You*, especially, are too young and too tender, my child, to live alone. I tremble to think what you would do if you fell sick."

The tone of his voice was so earnest that it made Lily Power stare.

"I am not so very young," she said; "I was twenty-two last birthday; and if I fell sick I could always go to the hospital."

Mark Kerrison shuddered.

"*The hospital!* For *you!* It is sacrilege to think of it; and I see this life is new to you also. You are not like others, who have supported themselves from the beginning. You have not been used to battle with the world. I am sure you were brought up in a very different position."

"I was, till my parents died."

"And do you like the stage?"

"Pretty well. It feeds me, and that is all I require of it. It does as well as anything else."

"Perhaps you do not anticipate remaining on it long, Miss Power?"

"I do not understand you."

"Most young ladies look forward to marriage. Yours may be already a settled thing."

She coloured faintly, and shook her head.

"O! no. I have no arrangements of that sort on hand, and am not likely to have. I shall never marry, Mr. Kerrison!"

"Have you such a dislike to the condition, then?"

"I have not tried it, and so I cannot say. But I should think it required more inducements than are ever likely to fall in my way to render it an irresistible temptation."

"It certainly requires certain adjuncts to give it a chance of turning out happily," replied Mark Kerri-son, gravely. "Money is a necessary evil in the arrangement. We hear a great deal of living on love; but love, as we know, won't buy bread and butter. And then there must be suitability of temperament; that is, if two people cannot agree, they must agree to differ. And under such circumstances I consider marriage ought to prove a sociable and comfortable arrangement, if not a very ecstatic one. What do you think?"

"I agree with you," replied Lily Power, who was, in effect, not thinking at all, except of the misery she had just gone through.

"Then will you be very much astonished," continued Mark Kerrison, nervously, "if I tell you that I have been considering the subject seriously of late, and that if—if—I can induce the woman I want to take me, I mean to get married myself?"

"Why should I be astonished?" she answered, smiling. "I am only surprised that, with all your advantages, you have not married before."

"Because I have never seen a girl whom I would have cared to call my wife until—until——"

"Well!" ejaculated Lily, almost laughing at his timidity.

"Until—the murder will out, my dear—until I saw you!"

She started back as if he had struck her.

"Until—you—saw—*me*?" she repeated, in a low voice.

"Yes. Is there anything wonderful in that? I am old compared to you, my child. I was forty-six on my last birth-day—more than double your age—but I can love you for all that. I *have* loved you, I think, from the first hour we met. Your youth, your loneliness, your poverty, and your anxieties have haunted me ever since like a troubled dream. I want to take you out of it all. I want to carry you home—to make you the mistress of my house and fortune—to raise you for ever above the grip of poverty, or the necessity to work for yourself. And if you will accept my offer, Lily, and become my wife, you will make me the proudest and happiest man in England."

"O, no, no, Mr. Kerrison, it is impossible—it can never be!"

She said the words with such a plaintive cry that it alarmed him.

"*Why* cannot it be?"

"I am not worthy. It would be absurd! What would the world say? To take a girl from my position in the theatre, on the lowest rung of the ladder, and ask her to share your popularity and famous name, it would be too incongruous. They would say you were mad!"

"You silly child! I don't ask you to marry the world—I ask you to marry *me*. And as for your position in the theatre (though I cannot imagine my not loving you at any time), I am sure you are sweeter and more unpolluted now than you could possibly be if you had gained the top of the ladder. If this is your only objection, it is as good as none."

He laid his hand gently on hers as he spoke, but she pulled it away from him.

"No, no; there are other obstacles, but I cannot explain them to you. There have been sore troubles in my past life which I could not tell to any man. They do not altogether belong to me, and I must not share them with a stranger. So I shall carry them alone until I die."

"And suppose I am willing to forego your confidence, my dear? To take you as I see you, satis-

fied that you are *what you are*, and that no woman could surpass you in my eyes? Cannot I in this way alleviate your troubles without intruding on their sacredness?"

"O, no, Mr. Kerrison, it would not be wise nor right in you to do so. Some day—who knows?—you might rise up and condemn me for my reticence. I only mentioned it to show you how entirely it forbids my considering your generous proposal."

"And were it not for this imaginary obstacle would you consider it?"

"How could I fail to do so? Do you think I am insensible or blind?"

"Then, Lily, think of it now. I do not pretend that a marriage with me could fulfil all the dreams you may have dreamt of a future life. I am a plain, middle-aged man, rather rough in my manners and unsociable in my habits. *But I love you.* Your presence in my house would turn it into a little heaven for me, and I would repay your goodness by every means in my power. If a marriage that would raise you above want, above solitude, above the necessity for work or anxiety of any kind, presents any advantages in your eyes, take my offer, and trust to me to see that you are not disappointed in your expectations."

Again he took her hand in his, and this time she did not draw it away.

"If I could be quite sure——" she faltered.

"Quite sure of what, my sweet?"

"That you would never come to me and say—
'You married me under false pretences. I thought you everything that was good, and I find you are everything that is bad——'"

"I could never say *that*, under *any* circumstances; if I found you had committed a murder, I could not say *that*."

"Well, then, if you said 'I expected more of you, and I am disappointed,' I think I should kill myself."

"But I shall *not* be disappointed," urged Mark Kerrison.

"Will you think of the worst woman you have ever known," went on the girl, hurriedly, "and then imagine I am she. Would you ask me to marry you *then*?"

"I would ask you if you had committed every crime in the Decalogue. I want no assurances—no confidences—no revelations—I want only *you*—just as you stand before me to-day, without one thing altered in your past or present; and so I say again, without a single question or condition, will you be my wife?"

But still she hesitated.

"You are not acting fairly to yourself, Mr. Kerrison; I have never thought of this before. It is a most unexpected surprise to me. I esteem and admire you above most men; your talent is a constant source of wonder to me; but I cannot pretend—it would be untrue to pretend I have even thought of—of—*loving you*."

"I do not suppose you have. I should scarcely believe you, my child, if you said you had. All I ask is to be allowed to love you. If the idea is not utterly distasteful to you, grant my request."

"The idea excites nothing but gratitude in my breast. I cannot think what I have done or said to merit such a distinction; but I am very sensible of it, Mr. Kerrison."

"And you will make me happy, Lily?"

"If I can," she answered gravely, as she placed her other hand on his.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNEQUAL GAME.

WHEN Mark Kerrison had done this deed, and drove from Lily Power's lodgings to his club as an engaged man, he began to feel very uncomfortable about it.

Not that he regretted his victory in the slightest degree. On the contrary, it had so elated him that his face was glowing with the pleasures of anticipation, and his pulses beating more rapidly than they had done at any time since five-and-twenty. And of course he was his own master, and free to order his life to please himself.

But he had talked so openly, and for so many years past, of his determination to keep single, and had impressed the advantages of celibacy with so much pertinacity on others, that he dreaded the jests his club companions would make at his expense when they learned the truth.

Miss Power had stipulated that the engagement should be kept a secret, at least for the present.

Mark Kerrison felt that the difficulty would be, not to hold his tongue on the subject, but to make his confession (especially to the home circle) when the time came for the revelation.

Colonel Escott he feared a little, but Mrs. Arlington a thousand times more. The former had the greater right to complain of the contemplated change, but the latter was bound to have the most to say about it.

No woman who has enjoyed absolute sway over the establishment of a bachelor ever likes to have a mistress set over her, and Mr. Kerrison still retained an uneasy recollection of the little scene which took place on the first night of "Miss Credo."

Notwithstanding, his conscience pricked him most on the score of his old chum James Escott. He had induced Jem to take up his permanent residence in Hyde Park Gardens on the express agreement that they were to end their days together, and it seemed hard he should be forced to seek another home.

Not that Mark Kerrison had the least intention of turning Colonel Escott out in order to make room for his young wife. On the contrary, he should do everything in his power to make him continue to live with them, but he justly doubted if Escott would accept the offer.

And so under all his secret triumph, Kerrison felt guilty and ill-at-ease, and his absence of mind and uncertain spirits soon made themselves patent to the two people he was most anxious to keep in the dark.

After having once inquired the cause and been put off with an evasive answer, Colonel Escott came to the conclusion that business matters were somehow going wrong with his friend; but Lola Arlington was not to be deceived by words.

She had watched Mark Kerrison's growing interest in Lily Power from the beginning of their acquaintance. She had suspected his feelings for her on the first night of "Miss Credo," and became assured of them on the occasion of the dinner-party.

Now, to be added to her other doubts, came his frequent absences from home, and his wandering thoughts, which had constantly to be brought back to the point.

With feminine tact, too, she detected various little alterations in his dress, which denoted a desire to appear more juvenile. His neckties were brighter, and frequently changed. He appeared in white waistcoats and highly-varnished boots; and laid in a set of Oxford shirts, that were only fit for a boy of twenty.

That silent, pale-faced girl had gained some influence over him—by what means Lola Arlington was at a loss to discover—but she felt certain, in her own mind, that it was she, and no other, who occupied Mark Kerrison's thoughts, and drew him so frequently from home.

To suppose that the jealousy that took possession of Mrs. Arlington's breast at this discovery was actuated only by the fear of losing her influence, or her situation, would be unjust.

In her way she really loved the somewhat *brusque* and uncouth genius whom she called master. She had been permitted to approach him nearer than others. She had watched the workings of his brain, and been lost in admiration of the talent which could construct so cunningly, and write so brilliantly, and put upon the stage so perfectly the creations of his fancy.

She was a clever woman, and could appreciate strength in others. And daily contact had caused her admiration to ripen into love, until she believed she could not live if anything came between her and Mark Kerrison.

The idea that he was cultivating an intimacy with another woman—with some one who might become necessary to him, perhaps, as she had

flattered herself *she* had done—who might try and supplant *her* in his estimation—step into her shoes—take over her work—fill the place in his establishment, which *she* would be no more needed to fulfil the duties of—O! it was maddening even to think of.

Mrs. Arlington had no idea, at that period, that Lily Power possessed any interest but that of friendship for Mr. Kerrison. But she did not wish him to have any female friends but herself. She dreaded the advent of a possible rival, and resolved, at all risks, to prevent it.

It was not long before everyone concerned saw that something was wrong with Mrs. Arlington. At first she displayed a persistent melancholy, but finding that it recoiled more on herself than on Mark Kerrison, especially as he was so seldom at home to be influenced by it, she went on a different tack, and tried if she could pique him by jealousy to take more notice of her.

The card she played was naturally the one closest to her hand, Colonel Escott; and the Colonel, with a fluttering wonder at his honest heart as to what her unusual attentions might mean, responded cordially to them. But the game was not a fair one, for the stakes were unequal, and one of the players was a sharper. Yet in this world, for every winner there

must be a loser, and Colonel Escott had to share the general lot. There was a day in the future, though as yet too far off to be distinguishable, when the trump card would be in his hand. Would he sacrifice it, or go in for his revenge?

It was usual for the two friends, when not entertaining guests themselves, to spend the Sunday evening quietly in their own house.

Escott had a simple, kindly heart, which would not permit him entirely to forget the teachings of his childhood; and he disliked all rioting and feasting on the first day of the week because he had been taught to keep it holy.

Kerrison, although reared in a very different school, was not sorry to have an evening he could call his own, and Mrs. Arlington was only too pleased to keep him for a few hours to herself.

The trio were accustomed to spend their Sunday evenings, therefore, in Colonel Escott's sanctum, where the men would smoke their pipes and talk over old times, or read their books and papers, whilst she went to the piano and sang softly to her own accompaniment or sat apart and wrote letters to her friends. They were peaceful, wholesome evenings, and Kerrison had often said they did him good, and he looked forward to them. But now he

seemed always seeking an excuse to spend them from home, and it was difficult to do so without raising the suspicions of those he left behind. One evening in particular, at the end of July, when he had arranged to take Lily Power to Richmond, he came downstairs just before the dinner hour, clad in morning costume, and evidently with no intention of joining the family party.

Mrs. Arlington, who was becomingly arrayed in white, looked woefully disappointed, and even Escott could not contain his surprise.

"Why, Mark, old fellow! what is this? Are we to lose you to-night?"

Mr. Kerrison appeared to be searching for his gloves.

"Yes; didn't I tell you, Jem? Some fellows begged me to go to Richmond. It's an awful nuisance. I hope you won't miss me; but I can't possibly avoid it."

"Oh, as to 'missing' you, that goes without saying," replied the Colonel, cheerfully. "We couldn't fail to miss you—could we, Mrs. Arlington? But business must come before pleasure, and I suppose there's business, as usual, at the bottom of this?"

"Naturally. I belong to everybody, you know, but myself. Well, good-bye, old fellow. I do not

expect to be very late. If you are still up on my return we'll have a pipe in the sanctum together. Good-night, Mrs. Arlington."

And with some confusion, Mark Kerrison got clear of the house.

The two he left behind felt rather disconsolate without him. They ate their dinner almost in silence, although Colonel Escott did all he could to entertain his fair companion.

"Come—come! this will never do," he exclaimed, as dessert was placed upon the table. "Mark will get too conceited if we let him see his absence has the power to affect us to this degree. Cannot we manage to pass a pleasant evening in each other's company for once in a way, Mrs. Arlington?"

She elevated her dark brows with well-acted surprise.

"Are you alluding to Mr. Kerrison's absence, Colonel Escott?"

"Well, I suppose so; or to the effect it is having on our conversational powers. I don't think you have said ten words to me all dinner-time."

"Oh, Colonel! what a calumny! It is *you* who are visiting your own depression of spirits upon me. If you condescended to take any notice of what I say whilst Mr. Kerrison is present, you would find I

never talk much on Sundays. It is such a holy, peaceful day. It seems quite sacrilegious to disturb its quiet by discussing worldly things."

The Colonel's blue eyes beamed with suddenly-awakened interest.

"Do you *really* think so? I had no idea you felt in such a manner."

"You thought, I suppose, that it is impossible for a woman who is generally engaged in worldly duties and conversation ever to have a serious moment. But sometimes the more careless and ungodly our surroundings, the more we are driven inwards to seek relief from them."

Colonel Escott stared. This was the sort of talk he had been used to years ago, when he lived with his mother at home; but he had seldom listened to it since. And to hear it from the lips of Lola Arlington was the strangest thing of all; yet he felt glad—very glad—that it should be so.

"I can't tell you how you interest me," he replied, earnestly. "I confess I was *not* prepared to listen to such an expression of feeling from you, but then I have never stopped to think or inquire what your ideas on such subjects were. The only thing which has disappointed me a little in meeting my dear old friend Mark Kerrison again—I am sure I

may speak openly to you, Mrs. Arlington, and that you will respect my confidence—is the utter absence of anything like religion that pervades himself and the company he frequents. Don't mistake me, Mrs. Arlington. I am not what is called a 'religious' man myself, and never have been. But not to hear the mention of anything but the world and the things of the world does jar on me sometimes. It seems as if in this great, careless, money-loving city, there was no time or space to think of anything but the amusement, and dissipation, and indulgence that shuts out the remembrance of a grave. It was so different in India," he concluded with a sigh.

"Perhaps you had more congenial friends in India," suggested Mrs. Arlington.

"Oh, no, indeed! I have never had a friend in all my life that I loved as I love Mark; but I lived chiefly alone whilst there, and solitude is conducive to serious thought."

"How well I know that, Colonel Escott; for though you may be surprised to hear me say so, I too have lived the chief part of my life alone—or worse than alone. For what real solitude can equal the heart-weariness induced by the weight of an uncongenial companionship! It is the memory of the

past that brings so many silent, depressing hours with it for me even now."

"But you are quite happy in the present?" interposed Colonel Escott, eagerly.

Mrs. Arlington glanced at him from the depths of her big brown eyes, and then lowered her lashes without a reply.

"I trust we are going to spend this evening together," remarked the Colonel, as they rose from the table. "You won't desert the sanctum because Kerrison is not in it, Mrs. Arlington?"

"Certainly not, if you prefer my company, Colonel Escott. But you must not stand on ceremony if you wish to be alone."

"*How* could I wish to be alone?" replied Escott, gallantly, as he held the door open for her to pass through.

She appeared, therefore, as usual with the coffee, and sang him some plaintive quasi-religious ballads suited to the occasion. The Colonel hung over her enraptured. He thought he had never met so attractive, so interesting a woman before.

"Do you know, Colonel Escott," she exclaimed, suddenly, as she finished a song about dreams and memories of long ago, "if you won't consider me *very* impertinent to say so, I cannot help thinking

that *you* have had a sad past as well as myself. Not in the same way, perhaps, but having much the same effect upon your spirits, and that you, like me, oftener dream of the future than of the present."

"Tell me about your past," he said, moving his chair nearer to hers; "and then I shall be better able to judge if your surmise is a correct one."

"There is little to tell except what all the world knows already," she answered, heaving a deep sigh. "A child of sixteen forcibly married to a man of sixty, without knowing what marriage meant, or what were its duties and its obligations; and then a life of horror, of deceit, and fraud, and chicanery—and I obliged, by threats of violence, to see it all, and make no sign. O, Colonel Escott, if you could guess what that bitter experience was like you would pity me!"

"I have heard something of it from the lips of my friend Kerrison, dear Mrs. Arlington, and I *do* pity you," replied the Colonel, pressing her hand.

"Ah! but you cannot realize it. And do you wonder, then, if my thoughts yet go back with feverish longing to those days when I was an innocent, happy child at my mother's knee, and I thirst to obliterate the terrible scenes that intervened, and

find myself there once more. These peaceful Sabbath evenings," she continued, gazing at him with the tears she had the magical faculty to conjure up at will standing in her eyes, and making them doubly charming—"how they appeal to all that is best in my nature! How I wish we could persuade dear Mr. Kerrison to go to church; it would make the day twice as dear!"

"Do you not go yourself?" inquired the Colonel, who could not have spent the week with a peaceful conscience if he had not attended divine service at least once on Sunday.

"*Of course!*" she replied, with ready deceit; "long before either of you lazy people are out of bed. But it is a kind of thing I don't care to talk about. There is so much profession and so little practice in the world, that it is best to keep one's most sacred feelings to oneself. One is so seldom given credit for sincerity. I would not have mentioned the subject to any one but *you*. But this is enough of myself; tell me of *your* troubles, dear Colonel Escott—that is, if you consider me worthy of such a confidence. A friend—especially a woman friend—can sometimes descry light where all appears to be in darkness. Not that I am presumptuous enough," she added, with her long black eyelashes

sweeping her cheek, "to think that you regard me in the character of a friend."

CHAPTER XVII.

"I AM GOING TO BE MARRIED."

THE Colonel seized her dimpled hand, and raised it deferentially to his lips.

"It is I who would be honoured by your permitting me to call you so," he answered. "Seeing the high esteem in which you are held by my friend Kerrison, I have long wished to ask you to give me a place in your regard; for, do you know, Mrs. Arlington, I fancied when I first came here that you quite disliked me, and the idea has given me much pain."

Mrs. Arlington's glance of distressed surprise was a picture.

"*Disliked you!* O, Colonel Escott, if you only knew my real opinion of your merits! But I am not in a position to express all that I feel. However, I thought the subject of myself was ended. If you consider me worthy to be your friend, treat me as such, and tell me what sad memory it is that makes you so often *distract* and thoughtful."

The Colonel flushed scarlet.

"Indeed there is nothing to tell; or, at least, so common a story that it possesses no interest, and one that happened so long ago that it is almost out of mind. I do not deny that my life has been a disappointment to me; I suppose few men or women, married or single, arrive at my age without the same conviction; and to suffer in company, they say, is to have your suffering halved; therefore, I conclude I am not worse off than my neighbours, and I am content it should be so."

"Have you no regrets then? No yearnings for a change?"

"I won't go so far as to say that. If things had gone right with me instead of wrong, and I was a married man at this moment, with my boys and girls growing up around me, I daresay I should be happier than I am at present; but the situation would have brought its cares and responsibilities with it, and perhaps I might sometimes have wished I had never undertaken them. You see, mankind is so perverse; we generally want that which we do not possess, and the best cure is to look around and see how impossible it is for any worldly condition to satisfy us. We must have some troubles in this life, and it is only a question of choice."

"But you must not talk as if all chances of happiness were over for you, Colonel Escott; you have not reached middle-age yet, and have many years before you with the capacity of enjoyment in them. Even the hopes you believe to be dead may yet be fulfilled—who can tell?"

"But I am not sure if I wish them to be fulfilled," replied the Colonel, gazing full at her handsome face; "I fretted a good deal whilst I was in India, for I was alone, and had nothing to distract my thoughts from dwelling on the past. But since I have returned home I have felt less and less regretful, and I think it would take a very little now to make me overcome it altogether."

"You must look out for a nice wife," said Lola Arlington, with a bewildering smile, "and the past trouble will vanish like an unholy dream."

"O, no," he answered; "I am like my friend Mark—I shall never marry; it is a compact between us. Besides, what should I marry for whilst I can live here and have you to look after me? Do you very much want to get rid of me?" he added, tenderly.

"There is no need for me to answer that question, Colonel Escott; you know how happy it makes me to be able to contribute to your comfort. But should this lady turn up——"

"She can never '*turn up*' as you call it," he said quickly; "and if she did——"

"She is not dead then?"

"No; she is not dead in the ordinary acceptance of the word, but she is dead to me. There will never be any further communication between us; I do not desire there should be. Will you not believe me when I say that in your friendship, since you are so good as to promise it to me, and in that of my dear Kerrison, I have all that I require to make my future life happy and contented?"

She heaved a deep sigh.

"And supposing Mr. Kerrison should marry——"

James Escott smiled with supreme incredulity.

"That is not probable—I might say, not *possible*. Mark and I have discussed the subject more than once, and he has convinced me of his resolution; he is no more likely to marry, Mrs. Arlington, than *I* am. Will you promise not to laugh at me if I tell you something?"

"Do *friends* laugh at one another?" she returned, softly.

"Once in a way, perhaps, for this is really ludicrous! When I first arrived in England and saw how charming you were, I accused poor Mark of an intention of marrying *you*."

"How *awfully* absurd!" she exclaimed, fanning herself vigorously; "and what did *he* say?"

"O, he denied it *in toto*, of course; and it was on that occasion, I think, that we plighted our troth of continual celibacy."

"But people *do* break their troths sometimes," suggested Mrs. Arlington.

"It must be hard for any man to keep it with *you* in the house," replied the Colonel, "but I am sure Kerrison will; he has too little faith in his own power to make a woman happy."

"And are *you* as incredulous, Colonel Escott, with regard to yourself?"

"I know I could have no recommendation to the fair sex, except their own love of exercising charity."

"O, dear! how blind you men are! and how unfairly you judge women! You never give us credit for valuing a friend for his mental attractions; it must be all outside show and glitter, or we shall pass you by. You really don't deserve a true woman's regard. How did you like the young ladies of the 'Credo' company, whom we entertained at dinner that memorable evening?"

"Not at all; I thought them ill-bred, superficial, and flashy—all, at least, except Miss Lily Power."

"O, you admire *her*?" rejoined Mrs. Arlington, quickly.

"She seems a gentle, refined, and ladylike sort of girl to me, but she is so silent one can hardly judge; any way, she stands out in pleasing contrast to such women as Miss Hartlebury and Miss Nevins. Don't you agree with me?"

"Not entirely, Colonel Escott: she appears to me to be deceitful—sly—and probably with something in the background to conceal. These silent streams run deep. I wish you could persuade Mr. Kerrison that she is not worthy of his regard."

"O, Kerrison simply looks on her in a business light. She fulfills his requirements of the character she has undertaken. He would never dream of making her a friend."

"I am not so sure of that, Colonel Escott; there are ill-natured rumours afloat about them, and his evident preference is doing the girl no good. I think such an intimate friend as you are might give him a hint on the subject."

But this was a matter Colonel Escott thought it better not to discuss behind Mark Kerrison's back, and so he evaded an answer by entreating his companion to sing to him again before they parted for the night.

She went to the instrument at once and trilled out another little ballad about tears and smiles, an angel love, and the joys of "long ago."

"How I wish I had known you in that *long ago!*" the Colonel ventured to whisper, as he hung over her.

"*Why?*" she asked, looking up at him.

This straightforward question was rather a poser, but he managed to get over it without an actual confession.

"Because, when we were both young and light-hearted, we might have enjoyed each other's society without the intervention of these sad memories."

"But we should have lost the privilege of consoling one another," she replied.

"Right!" he exclaimed, "as your sweet sex always are. Ah! if I could only believe that my true friendship might be any solace to you—the least distraction from the harrowing remembrance of your troubled girlhood—how proud, how happy I should be!"

"Don't undervalue it," she said, as she gave him her hand at parting; "I feel that it will prove a new era in my life."

Long after she had left him he sat still, thoughtfully smoking his pipe, and wondering how much or

how little she had meant by her last words, and whether it were possible that so brilliant and fascinating a creature could ever come to look upon him with any feeling warmer than friendship. How glad he was to think that he could cultivate her regard without treason to his dearest friend, and that Mark Kerrison would be happy to hear that she no longer looked on him as an interloper! Yet the simple Colonel had no idea he was falling in love with her. He thought she was an underrated and hardly-judged woman; that she possessed virtues and had experienced sufferings for which she gained no credit; and that if his esteem and friendship could bring any pleasure into her life, he should be only too proud of the knowledge.

He was still musing in this fashion when Mark Kerrison entered the room and disturbed his reverie.

"Hullo, Jem, old boy, are you still waking? I am glad of that, for I want to speak to you!" he exclaimed, as he threw himself into a chair.

"You are back earlier than we expected. It is only half-past ten," replied Escott. "Mrs. Arlington has not long left the room. She cannot have retired yet. Shall I tell her you have returned?"

"Hang Mrs. Arlington," said Kerrison, testily; "it is *you* I want, Jem, not her. I have something

to tell you. I know you will be awfully surprised, but it's no use beating about the bush. *I am going to be married!*"

"*What?*" cried the Colonel, nearly leaping from his seat, and quite uncertain if he had heard aright.

"I am going to be married," repeated Kerrison. "I have not made up my mind very long about it, or I should have told you before. Of course I felt bound to tell you the first of all. But there are reasons now—that is, I have come to the decision that the sooner the marriage takes place the better, and so I give you the earliest information. I am sure, old fellow, that you have too much regard for me not to wish me every good luck."

"*You are going to be married?*" said the Colonel, in a dreamy, incredulous voice. "Mark, you have positively taken my breath away! Going to be *married?* *You!* Why, it seems only like yesterday that you told me nothing on earth would induce you to change your condition."

"I know—I know," said the other, impatiently; "don't remind me of my folly. Yesterday, as you term it, I had not seen *her*."

"And who is the lady? Do I know her?"

"Didn't I mention her name? What a dolt I am; but you must guess it—Miss Power."

"*Miss Power!*" exclaimed Escott, more surprised than ever, "that pale girl? Why, Mark, she is a child compared to you!"

"Well, that signifies to no one but myself and her," returned Kerrison, roughly.

"No, no, of course not. Forgive me," said the Colonel, "and let me congratulate you, and say, Heaven bless you, Mark, with all my heart."

Leaving his seat, he walked over to the other's side and grasped both his hands cordially, and looked into his face with eyes not altogether guiltless of tears.

"My dear old Mark—my best and most constant friend—I shall so sincerely rejoice at anything which brings you happiness. And this marriage *will* make you happy, will it not? You have well considered? You have done nothing in a hurry? You are quite sure that Miss Power is the one woman in the world for you?"

"I am *quite* sure, my dear boy. Do you think I should break through the resolution of years for less? The fact is, Jem, I have never met any one before in all my life that I ever wished to marry; but she is so pure—so gentle—so like her namesake, Lily, that I cannot conceive how she ever consented to be my wife."

"O, come! Mark, that is nonsense! There is not a woman in London but might be proud to share the name you have made so famous. I am not the least surprised to hear that Miss Power has accepted your offer. I am only just a *little* bit astonished to hear you made it."

"After all my vows of celibacy and resolutions against the sex," said Kerrison, with half a smile and half a sigh. "You may well be, Jem. I am more than a little bit astonished at myself! But I am afraid our vows become as melting wax when the one woman who can influence us brings her charms to bear against them! I know mine vanished into air. Women are terrible temptresses, Jem, when you love them; one feels one could lay down one's life for their sake, let alone all one's good resolutions!"

"I suppose so!" replied the Colonel, gravely; "at least I *know* so, for I, too, have loved in my day. And you really care for Miss Power like this, Mark?"

"I care for her more than for all the rest of the world put together!" replied his friend, solemnly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"WHAT WILL MRS. ARLINGTON SAY?"

AFTER this the two men smoked for some time without speaking a word. Escott could not quite trust himself to ask any more questions about the contemplated change, which involved so many undreamt-of contingencies; and Kerrison felt half guilty, and more than half foolish, as he remembered how often he had pictured a future to his friend which he had been the first to destroy.

At length the silence was becoming oppressive, and Colonel Escott made an effort to break it.

"I wonder," he said, reflectively, "what Mrs. Arlington will say!"

The allusion nettled Kerrison. He also had wondered (more than once) what Mrs. Arlington would say, but he was too proud to confess it.

"I don't understand you, Jem," he answered. "I am not in the habit of consulting my servants about my private affairs!"

"Mark, you would never call Mrs. Arlington a *servant*?"

"No! I was wrong to use that term, perhaps;

but your remark instigated it! What I should have said is, that I should as soon think of consulting my servants as Mrs. Arlington. She is a paid *employée* in my establishment, and has nothing to do with any department but her own."

"But will she continue to fill that department under the new arrangement?"

"Why should she not?"

"I don't know! The question simply occurred to me. Ladies do not always get on very well with each other."

"Mrs. Arlington will have nothing to do with my wife. I shall put it to—to Lily if she wishes her to continue to direct the housekeeping. If she *does*—things will go on as usual. If she does *not*—Lola will subside into my secretary only, and my wife will look after her own house. I see no difficulty in the matter."

"Not from your point of view, perhaps; but women are difficult creatures to deal with, and I have always heard that when a bachelor who has kept up an establishment like yours, marries, he generally finds he has to get rid of the female members of it!"

"Then Lola Arlington may go!" replied Kerrison, promptly.

"Go?" echoed Colonel Escott, in surprise.

"Yes; of course she must go! Do you suppose I shall allow a single creature, male or female, to remain in the house to annoy my darling? Not a bit of it! I am going to marry her in order to try and remove the worries and troubles of life from her path—not to augment them! And whoever annoys her in the slightest degree, or fails to make her more comfortable instead of less, must find a home elsewhere. That is all!"

"I had no idea," said the Colonel, in a voice which was a little shaky on Mrs. Arlington's account, "I had no idea that you would part with an old and tried friend in so uncourteous a manner. Think how careful Mrs. Arlington has been of your comfort—how devoted to your interests. You would surely not resent a little natural annoyance on her part by a summary dismissal?"

"What right would she have to feel annoyed?" demanded Kerrison, with an uncomfortable recollection of the avowal she had made to him.

"Only the right of friendship to mourn when it finds itself no longer *first*," replied Escott, sighing.

"That's a hit at *me*, old fellow, and all the promises I have made to keep to you, and to you only, to my life's end. But you mustn't imagine

that my marriage will make any difference between *us*. No woman can come between you and me; you will still be my best friend and chum to my life's end. Promise me."

"Always your best and truest friend, Mark, to the day of your death," replied the Colonel, with emotion. "You may depend upon it."

"That's right; and all the rest may go hang! I know you will be charmed with my Lily, and she will soon be as fond of you as I am. As for Mrs. Arlington, I will speak to her the first thing in the morning, and she must decide for herself. If she doesn't care to stay with me as a married man I will look out for another secretary; but if she *does* stay she must treat my wife with the deference and attention due to the mistress of my house, or we shall fall out on that score."

The idea of Lola Arlington treating Lily Power with deference was so incongruous an one, that Colonel Escott did not stop to contemplate it, but passed on to another subject:

"When is the marriage to take place, Mark?"

"At the close of the season. I have already secured a shooting-box in the Highlands as you know. I shall take my wife there for the honey-

moon, and after a fortnight you must join us, and we'll have a rare time after the grouse together."

"Thanks, dear old man, but you will be better alone, and I shall have business to detain me in town."

"What business?"

"Well, I shall have to look out for rooms for myself for one thing, and the furnishing of them will occupy all my time."

"Jem, you are not in earnest?"

"What do you mean, Mark?"

"You will not leave me because I am going to be married! You promised, you know, to take up a permanent abode in my house. I look upon you as a fixture here—in fact, I *will not* part from you."

"My dear fellow, that is nonsense! The arrangement was made under the idea that we were both to remain bachelors. Now that you are about to blossom into a married man all such promises must come to an end. What would your wife say to having a constant visitor at your table?"

"My wife will say what *I* say," insisted Kerrison; "and *I* say that you shall not go. Here you are, and here you remain."

"It is impossible, Mark. It would not make me happy. It will not be the same thing at all. I

should feel like an 'outsider.' I am quite determined to make a home for myself."

It was the first cloud that had arisen to overshadow Kerrison's bright anticipations of the future, and he felt it deeply. He did not argue the matter further, he did not even go on smoking, but he put his pipe on one side and leaned his head despondently on his two hands.

Escott guessed his thoughts, and drew nearer to him.

"Don't worry about it, old fellow," he said, gently. "It's only what was to be expected in the natural course of events. I never *quite* believed that, with your wealth and popularity, you would keep single for ever. I have had a very happy time of it whilst here, and I shall never forget it. But I shall always be near at hand, and able to drop in on your disengaged evenings, and smoke a pipe as we have been doing now."

"It won't be the same thing," echoed Kerrison, wringing his hand.

"We will hope it may be something much pleasanter," said Escott, cheerfully. "And who knows but one of these days I may follow your example, and look out for a wife for myself. Then there will be *two* good old bachelors spoiled instead of one."

"It's all very well to laugh," responded Mark Kerrison, irritably; "but you have made me miserable."

And on the following morning, when he sent word to Mrs. Arlington to join him in the library, the same idea was in his mind.

"I suppose *she* will give me warning too!" he thought fiercely to himself; "and then I shall have lost both of them."

The anticipation made him almost rough in his manner of announcing the news to her:

"Mrs. Arlington, I have something of importance to tell you—at least it may prove of importance in shaping your plans for the future. I am going to be married to Miss Power on the tenth of next month."

To say that the woman was surprised is nothing. She felt as if she had been suddenly turned to stone. The repulse which she had received at Mark Kerrison's hands a month before had only (if possible) inflamed her desire to conquer him. It had staggered her, but not made her despair. She still trusted in *maman's* prophecies, and believed that in time she should win him for herself; and now he was about to be married—to be lost to her perhaps for ever!

She flushed and paled under the intelligence, and her body swayed to and fro where she stood; and yet she had sufficient command over herself to look him full in the face and say:

“Indeed, sir!”

“Yes, it is true. I should have told you sooner had it been possible; but it came about at the last rather suddenly, as I suppose such things usually do. Any way, it is a fact. And now I want to know your wishes on the subject.”

“*My* wishes, Mr. Kerrison!”

“I mean with respect to your situation here. Do you intend to retain it or not?”

CHAPTER XIX.

MRS. ARLINGTON WOULD RATHER STAY.

LOLA ARLINGTON did not know at first what to answer. She had reigned in that house like its mistress; she had had the control of everything. The servants had been retained or dismissed as she thought proper, and no limit had been placed on her expenditure or her authority. To remain in it, therefore, under the rule of Lily Power would be gall and wormwood to her. And yet how could she

part with *him*? How could she go forth to seek another home where she should never hear his voice nor see his face again? The unfortunate woman, with the blind, unreasoning love of an animal, which brings no intellect to bear upon and counteract the evil of its grosser nature, believed that she would kill herself sooner than give up the dangerous pleasure that formed her daily food. Even if she must resign all hope of becoming his wife, she would still remain near him, she thought, and retain her influence over him, and continue to make herself a necessary adjunct to his life. That his wife (if she loved him) would be made unhappy by such a course of action never entered for one moment into the calculation of Mrs. Arlington. Wives, in her estimation, were insignificant items, whose happiness (however authorized) was not to be thought of for a moment in comparison with her own. It was *herself* she considered, and therefore, notwithstanding her disappointment and chagrin, she elected to remain. To gain time she repeated Mark Kerrison's words:

"Do I intend to retain my situation or not? The question rather is, sir, do *you* intend to retain *me*?"

"Of course I do, under—under certain conditions."

"May I inquire what those conditions are?"

"You set me an unpleasant task in asking me to repeat them, but I don't think I need do more than remind you of a certain confidence that took place between us a month ago, for your answer."

Mrs. Arlington's brow grew dark at the allusion, but she made no comment upon it.

"I suppose, although it may sound egotistical," continued Mark Kerrison, "that it is only due to my future wife and myself that I should tell you, Mrs. Arlington, that we are very much attached to one another, and that what hurts her will hurt me. Also, that I expect and intend her to come into my house as its sole mistress; and although I do not think she will have any desire to interfere with your prerogatives, her wishes on all points must be deferred to as if they were law."

"Of course!" said Mrs. Arlington.

"She possesses a sweet, gentle nature, without any idea of domineering or tyrannizing, and she has known trouble, and will be quick, I am sure, to feel for others. But she will be *my wife*—the honoured head of my household, and the first thought in my life—therefore she must be treated as such by everyone who lives under the same roof."

"I expected no less, Mr. Kerrison!"

"And I expected no less of you than a recogni-

tion of her rights, Mrs. Arlington. I was sure you were too sensible a woman to do anything else. But if—under the circumstances—you would rather leave me than stay—say so.”

“I would rather stay! It would be folly of me to pretend that I shall not somewhat feel the change, but you shall not be troubled by any knowledge of it. Let me stay and be your friend and assistant, as I have been hitherto. The future Mrs. Kerrison will never receive anything but the utmost courtesy and deference from me. Only—unless you find she can better fill the place than myself—let me still be your secretary—your housekeeper, if it pleases you both—and I will continue to serve you as faithfully as I hitherto have done!”

“O! I don’t think the ‘future’ Mrs. Kerrison, as you call her, will interfere with either your secretarial or housewifely duties,” replied Mark, softly laughing to himself. “She is a tender flower like her name, who has consented to bloom in my garden for the rest of her days. She is too delicate for work of any kind, and should never have been set to rough it in the world. But we shall soon remedy all that! On the tenth of next month, then, Mrs. Arlington, my house will have a mistress. Please

make the fact known in the servants' hall; it will save me an infinity of trouble. Good morning!"

"Are you not going to work to-day, Mr. Kerrison?"

"Well, no, I think not!" he said, rather confusedly. "The fact is, I am not much in the humour for work just now (as you may suppose), and there will be plenty of time for it when I have settled down. I am going to Greenwich, and may not return to dinner. In which case, make my apologies to Colonel Escott. I suppose you have nothing more to say to me?" he continued, moving towards the door.

"Nothing, Mr. Kerrison."

He nodded carelessly to her in reply, and passed from the room, leaving her standing by the table with an expression on her face which was not pleasant to behold. Her hand too, as it hung down by her side, was clenched with anger, and the eyes that followed his retreating form were dark and vindictive.

Mark Kerrison would have reason yet to remember the day when he told Lola Arlington that he was going to marry Lily Power.

CHAPTER XX.

AT APPLESCOURT.

THE season was over. The theatres were closing one after the other, and London streets looked empty. Everyone who had enough money to leave town had rushed away to the seaside or the country, trying to shake off the defilement of dust and the enervating effects of languid days and heavy nights in the breezes from the Channel or the fresh luxuriance of the woods and fields.

Applescourt, situated in the heart of Surrey, was in its summer glory. It was an ideal estate for a gentleman of independent means, owning a park, and a wood, and a lake, with an extensive flower-garden, and just sufficient farm and poultry-yard to supply the wants of the family.

Mrs. Fielding, to whom the property belonged in her own right, was very proud of it, and boasted of possessing the finest flower-garden, the longest line of hothouses, and the best gardener in England. Reynolds (as this last-named functionary was called) was always well to the front at every horticultural show, and had a row of prize silver cups upon his

sideboard that were the envy of the neighbours. His mistress was as great an enthusiast as himself, and almost spent her life amongst her flowers. Indeed it was the general opinion of the country-side that Mrs. Fielding only cared for two things in the world—her garden and her son—and no one was quite sure which she loved the best.

If she was a good mother to Esmé she was certainly not a pleasant one, for she tried to rule him with a rod of iron. He was her only child, and she had been left a widow at nineteen, with nothing but her little boy to comfort her. She had been deeply attached to her husband. She had married him, being a great heiress and he a poor man, against the wishes of all her friends; she had regretted but one thing—that he had died and left her to enjoy her riches by herself. Nothing, however, would induce her to part from their son.

Until the days of infancy were over, Esmé had slept in her bosom all night, and been her constant companion by day. As he grew older, her friends entreated her to send him to a public school and make a man of him. But Mrs. Fielding insisted on having a private tutor for him instead. She brought him up to no profession. Her only wish was to educate him to be a companion for herself, and a

fitting inheritor of her property when she should be gone.

Meanwhile the youth moped and became discontented with his lot, and fell into mischief for the want of something to do. The doctors, probably instigated by young Esmé's relations, recommended travel and change of scene, and most unwillingly Mrs. Fielding gave her consent to his going abroad for a twelvemonth with his tutor. This had happened about three years ago. Meantime his mother, feeling lonely in his absence and missing the presence of youth in the house, had secured the services of a young girl as companion, and imprudently retained them after her son's return. The usual consequences ensued. The girl was pretty and innocent—the boy impressionable.

In an evil moment Mrs. Fielding discovered that the two young people had plighted their troth to one another, and exchanged rings.

In her blind rage and mortification she even thought she had discovered much more; and the idea that Esmé had dared to free himself from her leading-strings, and choose his own path in life, drove her frantic.

She was a woman of a violent temper, and it had never been crossed before. She called her son

and her companion to appear in judgment before her, and accused them of a mutual affection.

They could not deny it. They even went so far as to appeal to her sense of justice and mercy; and led away by her anger at their apparent opposition, she commanded Esmé to choose at once and for ever between herself and the girl he professed to love.

The young man was taken aback. He did not know what to do. To give up his mother, who had been everything to him from his birth, was an impossibility. Yet it seemed equally impossible to desert the trembling girl he had been the means of bringing into this trouble. He tried to temporize in vain; he appealed to his mother's affection for him with no better effect. Mrs. Fielding was adamant. He must relinquish her society, and all hopes of inheriting her property—or this low-born girl whom he had chosen to degrade himself by associating with.

It was an awful moment for Esmé—one of those eras in a man's existence when it seems impossible for him to act kindly and honourably by all. He had a hard struggle with himself, but, when it ended, his choice had fallen on his mother's side, and Mrs. Fielding was triumphant.

But she could not let the matter rest there. She drove the poor girl (who had been the cause of her trouble) from the gates of Applescourt, with such revilings and innuendoes as robbed her of her reputation for ever.

And then, when frightened, trembling, and in tears, the poor young creature fled from her sight, Mrs. Fielding turned her attention to consoling her son. But this proved to be no easy matter. Esmé either sulked, or sorrowed so much, that his mother found very little pleasure in his society.

At last he startled her by a demand for an allowance adequate to his position. He was then of age, and considered, as he had no profession, that it was only due to him.

Mrs. Fielding felt this circumstance bitterly. It was the first effort Esmé had made to break the chain that linked him to Applescourt, and she feared lest, once free, he might fly away altogether.

But when she consulted her friends on the subject they advised her to comply with her son's request, or to anticipate worse consequences. He would run away to sea, or to Australia, they said, if she did not lengthen his tether.

So, much against her will, Mrs. Fielding agreed

to give him five hundred a year as a private allowance, and the usual result ensued.

Esmé spent more than half his time away from Applescourt, and only returned there when he had exhausted his revenue. He was at home at present, however, and his mother was content.

She thought he looked ill and pale, but he gave no account of his doings, and only attributed his appearance to the unusual heat of the London season.

He never mentioned the rupture of his youthful attachment to Mrs. Fielding, and she often wondered if he had met that disreputable girl again, or if he were in communication with her. She would have liked to question him, but she dared not.

It was two years now since it occurred, and Esmé had advanced to manhood with rapid strides, and bore a look upon his handsome face so like his father, that she felt sometimes just a little afraid of displeasing him; so the matter appeared to be sunk in oblivion.

They were sitting at breakfast one morning together, in a pleasant, lazy sort of way, skimming their letters and newspapers as they ate and drank. It was burning hot in London at the time, where the August sun was streaming down on bricks and tiles that had not yet cooled from the day before;

but here at Applescourt, although the land was flooded with light, a cool breeze was rustling through the pine-woods, and wafting perfume on its wings as it gently lifted the paper that Mrs. Fielding was trying to decipher.

"What a string of marriages!" she remarked presently. "It seems as though people purposely delayed their wedding-day until they were ready to leave London, in order to make one journey serve both purposes."

"And very sensible too," yawned Esmé. "There's quite enough to do in the season without having to marry anyone!—such a bore as it must be at any time!"

Mrs. Fielding laughed at his nonchalance. It seemed as if he had quite got over his youthful folly for the dismissed companion.

"What is the name of the man with whom Colonel Escott is living?" she asked presently.

"Mark Kerrison."

"Then he is married. Listen here—'On the tenth of August'—that was last Thursday—'at All Saints', Bayswater, Mark Kerrison, of 302, Hyde Park Gardens, to Lily Power.'"

"To whom?" cried Esmé, suddenly leaving his seat, and crossing over to her side.

"Lily Power. Who is she? Do you know her?"

"Where is the paragraph?" he asked, as he took the paper from her hands.

Women are very sharp in all matters connected with the heart. Esmé spoke low, and tried hard not to let his voice tremble; but Mrs. Fielding detected the effort at once, and looked up quickly in his face. It was paler than it had been, and his dark, straight brows were knitted together. Her suspicions were aroused at once.

"I have read it out to you! There is nothing more to see," she said, sharply.

But he took no notice of the remark.

"Well," continued Mrs. Fielding, after a pause, "why don't you answer my question? Do you know this Lily Power, that you appear so interested in the marriage?"

"I know Mr. Kerrison," he replied, evasively; "is not that enough? And I am surprised my godfather never told me he was going to be married; it is most unexpected! In fact, the only time the subject was mooted before me, it was to hear it emphatically contradicted!"

"Who contradicted it?"

"Mrs. Arlington—Mr. Kerrison's lady-secretary."

"And did you meet this Lily Power there?"

"Yes; I met her there."

"Esmé, what is the matter with you this morning? You don't mean to tell me that the mere fact of this woman bearing *that girl's* name has the power to affect you? You are not so weak and foolish, surely, as to be hankering after that old business still?"

At this allusion Esmé Fielding flushed darkly red.

"Mother, that 'old business,' as you call it, took place two years ago, and I have never spoken to you of it from that day to this. I don't recognize your right, therefore, to rake it up again."

"You may not have *spoken* of it, but you have often *thought* of it; and that you cannot deny."

"I have no wish to deny it. I shall think of it to the day of my death!"

"Esmé, I am ashamed of you! I thought you had more pride! An ill-bred, presuming girl——"

"Mother! if you don't stop I shall say something you will be sorry to hear; for if I have not spoken of that time to you, it is because I have been too angry to trust myself to speak of it! Did you imagine that my silence meant approval? That because I was too foolish, or too cowardly, to stand up in the defence of Lily Prescott, as I should have done, I had no eyes for your injustice to her—no indignation for

your unwomanly taunts and threats? If so, you are marvellously mistaken! I have thought of her constantly! I have never forgotten that degrading day when you turned the poor child out of Applescourt without a name, a character, or a friend! Whatever has become of her since—whether she is an honoured wife, or has joined that unhappy company that nightly haunts our streets, her fate lies at your door! Her blood is on your hands! If you have any wish to retain my affection or respect, don't mention the name of Lily Prescott to me, for it is the shame and mortification of my life!”

Mrs. Fielding was astonished at this outburst. Her son had been so reticent hitherto, that she was quite unprepared for it, and guessed at once that it must have been caused by some later incident than the one he alluded to. Was it possible that these two Lilys were the same? And yet how could Mr. Mark Kerrison have committed the folly of marrying an outcast?

“Don't attempt to deceive me!” she exclaimed, with true feminine tact, assuming that to be true of which she needed the assurance, “you have met that girl again, and it is useless denying it.”

“Why should I deny it?” he returned. “I am my own master.”

"So you take good care to let me know!" said his mother, bitterly. "But you would do well to remember that your allowance can be withdrawn at my pleasure, and that I am at liberty to leave my property to whom I think fit."

"Oh! take back your allowance, then, and leave your money to the butler, if it pleases you!" exclaimed Esmé, "for I am weary of these constant threats; or, rather, since it is my misfortune to be dependent on you, let me draw a year's allowance in advance, and I will go out to Australia or America, and rid you of my presence for ever! I am sick of England, and everything in it, and wish for no better fate than to lose myself and my identity in a new world!"

"He has seen that girl, and she is beyond his reach," thought Mrs. Fielding, sagely. "I shouldn't be in the least surprised to find it is *she* who has entrapped poor Mr. Kerrison; she was artful enough for anything! I shall make it my duty to discover, for I will not let Esmé fall into her clutches a second time. If this is not Lily Prescott under an assumed name, why should he be so upset at reading of the marriage? There's more here than meets the eye."

As she pondered thus behind the shelter of the newspaper—she was too agitated to read—Esmé

was gnawing his heart out on the opposite side of the table.

“*Married!*” he thought—“married, and gone beyond my reach for ever! How mad I was to speak to her as I did! My action must have determined her fate!”

He did not address his mother again, but rising, presently, took out his cigar-case and prepared to pass through the French windows into the garden.

Mrs. Fielding became afraid she had gone too far; she crossed the room to her son’s side, and, standing on tip-toe, kissed him on the forehead.

“We won’t talk about Australia just yet, my boy,” she said, kindly; “you know you can have double your present allowance, if it is not sufficient, and that all my real desire is for your happiness. If we don’t always *quite* agree on what will further it, you must ascribe my different views to a mother’s anxiety. You are all I have, Esmé; I could not part with you; but don’t let us broach this subject again, my dear. It can lead to nothing but unhappiness; let it be dropped between us henceforth, and for ever.”

She was very careful to make no further allusion to Mr. Kerrison’s marriage, or the lady who had denied its possibility; but she had forgotten neither

of them nevertheless, and she fully intended to carry out her plan of discovery.

Colonel Escott and she were naturally friends, and through him she would be able to find out all she wished; but she knew the only way to lull Esmé's suspicions regarding her actions was to pretend that the painful subject was closed between them for ever.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

WHILST this little episode was occurring between Esmé Fielding and his mother at Applescourt, Colonel Escott and Mrs. Arlington had much need of mutual comfort in London.

The marriage—a quiet affair, at which no one but the principal actors concerned were present—was over.

Mark Kerrison had seen such long faces pulled each time the subject was alluded to, and Lily Power shrank so palpably from publicity, that between his dread of ridicule, and her dread of criticism, they had walked into church one morning by themselves, and emerged thence as man and wife. For the same

reason Mr. Kerrison had not been able to persuade Miss Power to re-enter the house, of which she was so soon to be the mistress, so that the inmates had not seen her since the day of the dinner-party; and a letter, which the bridegroom posted to Escott the day of the wedding, as they were starting for the Highlands, was the first intimation the household received that their master was married. It was written in Mark's usual affectionate style, yet the Colonel did not feel much the happier for its reception.

"Dear old chum," he said, "you must join us as soon as ever you can, for I shall not begin to enjoy myself until you arrive. Don't be afraid that we shall bore you by an exhibition of conjugal bliss. Lily is the most sensible woman I ever met, and agrees with me that such things are best kept for privacy. The land-agent at Glencara writes me word the birds are very plentiful this season, and there is room for six guns on the little preserve. If you come—which of course you will—I shall ask Chantrell to join us, and then you will be always sure of a companion. Or would you prefer to bring young Fielding? Do just as you please, old man; only come as soon after the twentieth as you can."

But Escott would not go. He did not doubt the sincerity of Kerrison's invitation, but he had no heart to accept it.

"Mark must give me a little more time to become reconciled to the idea of his being a married man," he said in confidence to Mrs. Arlington, as they sat at dinner together. "It is stupid of me, I suppose, but I cannot realize it. He has always been the embodiment of freedom to me. It seems so impossible to picture him tied to a woman's apron-string—perhaps to the couch of a sickly woman, for she looks anything but healthy to me—and obliged to give up his bachelor dinners, and come home early and play propriety. I feel as if he would not be the same Mark I have known. And (if I am not mistaken, Mrs. Arlington) *you* think much as I do."

For Lola Arlington had been unusually grave and quiet since the reception of the news, although her heart was thirsting to find out some means of revenge.

"You are quite right, Colonel," she answered, with a sigh. "Of course it is not my part to criticize any action of Mr. Kerrison's, but—I speak to you in the strictest confidence—I cannot help thinking this marriage is very ill-advised. I have thought so from the beginning. I don't know that, under any cir-

cumstances, Mr. Kerrison would be happy as a married man, but he should at least have united himself to someone in the same position of life."

"Miss Power is a lady," rejoined Escott quickly; "at least I have always understood so."

"O, I daresay *she* says so, Colonel, but I don't know what means Mr. Kerrison has taken to ascertain the truth. She has never produced any of her relations. He is not even aware if the name she goes by is her own."

"I think Mark *must* have made sure of *that!*" said her companion, uneasily. "But it certainly seems very strange that we have heard nothing of her family. She is bound to have kinsmen somewhere. And this exceedingly private marriage—too! I am sorry Kerrison agreed to it. It may make ill-natured people fancy there is something wrong."

"They're sure to say *that*," replied Mrs. Arlington, with a dubious laugh; "and I am afraid poor Mr. Kerrison will find he has laid up trouble for himself. However, it is done now, and no one can help him. But I suppose you will join them after a time, Colonel Escott? It will do you good to have a little change, and there is no saying how soon your friend may require the comfort of your presence."

"I have no intention of doing so," said the

Colonel, with a tender glance beaming from his blue eyes. "London whilst *you* are here—is quite good enough for me, and leaves me no desire for change. If Mark had proposed to ask you to Glencara to be my companion, instead of Chantrell, it might have formed an inducement for me to alter my plans. As it is, there is none."

It will be seen by these words that the pledge of friendship entered into by Colonel Escott and Mrs. Arlington on a certain Sunday evening, some time before, had been more than redeemed. Indeed, in the infatuated woman's desire to pique Mark Kerrison, by an affectation of interest in his friend, she had said and listened to a great deal more on the part of the latter than she had at first intended, and did not see the way open for her to draw back.

"And what *are* your plans?" she answered, smiling.

"If I thought there was any chance of your being in the same place, I should run down for a few weeks to the seaside, but I suppose there is not?" said the Colonel, wistfully.

"My dear Colonel, what are you thinking of? What would become of the house and the servants if I were away? O no, there is no hope of *my* hav-

ing a holiday this year. Here I remain until our people return."

"Then I shall do the same," replied Escott—"that is, I shall stay in London. I have seen a cosy set of chambers near the Marble Arch, which will just suit me, and it will take me some time to fit them up according to my fancy. I am a regular old bachelor, Mrs. Arlington, as you must have found out by this time—fussy and fidgety to a degree—and I shall want everything about me to be very nice. Will you give me the benefit of your taste in furnishing? It will be so very kind of you, and I shall value my things twice as much if they have met with your approval."

"Of course I will give you all the assistance in my power, Colonel," said Lola bashfully. "Although I shall be *dreadfully* sorry to see you go away, and the house will seem empty to me after your departure."

"My dear girl," cried Escott, getting hold of one of her hands, "how I wish I could persuade you to come and keep house for me! what a happy little home we might make for ourselves together! I am not rich, it is true; but I have enough for comfort and—— But there—I suppose it is of no use trying to tempt you to leave Kerrison!"

He dropped her hand again as he concluded, and she avoided the question in his eyes by professing to arrange the lace on her bosom.

Leave Kerrison indeed! If the simple Colonel could have looked into her heart he would have read how hopeless such an attempt would be.

"My dear Colonel, I feel so flattered by your suggestion; but you must know the plan is impossible. Whatever would people say if I left Mr. Kerrison's service to go and keep house for you? You forget that I am a poor unprotected woman, with nothing but my character to earn a living by."

"Forgive me. It was a stupid thing for me to say, but I hope you did not misunderstand my meaning. The highest lady in the land could not receive more honour than I should pay to you; but my tiny *ménage* would necessarily afford no scope for the exercise of your domestic talents."

"If it is so tiny I daresay I shall be able to manage them both," said Mrs. Arlington, gaily; "and having ordered Mr. Kerrison's dinner here, run over to give an eye to the cleaning of your furniture there."

"Is that a promise?" exclaimed the Colonel eagerly. "May I *really* hope that you will sometimes brighten my rooms with your presence, and

cheer up a lonely old bachelor with your charming talk? For I shall be *really* lonely, Mrs. Arlington, when I leave you."

"And do you suppose I shall not feel the same?" she answered, dropping her eyes.

He seized her hand again, pressed it, and released it with a sigh. Then—as if he dared not trust himself longer in her presence—he turned from her suddenly, and left the room.

Lola Arlington looked after him with a smile of derision upon her countenance.

In consequence of this conversation the next day's post conveyed a letter of hearty congratulation to the newly-married pair in the Highlands, but a decided refusal to visit Glencara. And for the next fortnight Colonel Escott and Mrs. Arlington might have been met in diverse places, with their heads close together in earnest consultation over the various merits of inky-blue or terra-cotta; over silks and stuffs, or wall-papers.

Every article of furniture for the new chambers was chosen according to the taste of Lola Arlington, or made up under her direction; and bystanders who only watched the game, would have been puzzled to know with what object (Mr. Kerrison being out of her reach) this woman toiled to keep herself on good

terms with Colonel Escott. But she never did anything without a purpose. She saw, in this honest, simple gentleman, a tool ready made to her hands for the future, and that it was to her advantage to keep him in the dark with regard to her real feelings. What pain *he* might suffer in consequence never troubled her mind for a moment. She thought only of herself and her own benefit. She saw that he was kind-hearted and susceptible, and greatly admired her, and trusted, by playing on his feelings, to secure a friend for the hour of need.

Things were in this position one day towards the end of August when she returned home hot, tired, and dusty, to be informed that a lady was in the drawing-room, waiting to see her.

Mrs. Arlington's first impulse was to deny herself to the visitor. She had been standing about all day choosing carpets and curtains, and fatigued herself too much even to do justice to the luncheon which the Colonel had gallantly provided for her afterwards. Besides, she knew of no lady whom it would be to her interest to receive. She was not a woman to make friends with her own sex—as a rule she detested them; and the few female guests Mark Kerrison invited to his house were not in the habit of calling on Mrs. Arlington afterwards. Yet the

footman informed her that the visitor had asked for her distinctly by name, and been waiting for more than half an hour to see her. She therefore concluded it was her duty to inquire at least what she wanted. As she entered the drawing-room a tall, thin, dark woman, fashionably attired, rose from the sofa and bowed to her.

"Mrs. Arlington, I presume?"

"That is my name, madam. Perhaps you are not aware that Mr. Kerrison is absent from home and will not return for another month."

"It is *you* I called to see, and not Mr. Kerrison," replied the visitor; "for although I know him very well by name, I am not personally acquainted with him. I am Mrs. Fielding, the mother of Mr. Esmé Fielding, whom you may have seen here."

"Have I really the pleasure of speaking to Mrs. Fielding?" cried Lola, her interest in the stranger immediately aroused. "How sorry I am, madam, to think that you should have been kept waiting. But it was unavoidable. I have been out all day choosing furniture for Colonel Escott; and he is away too. I regret to say he is about to leave us on account of Mr. Kerrison's marriage, of which doubtless you have heard. I am afraid it will be a terrible break up

for us all. And of course you want to see the Colonel?"

"No, Mrs. Arlington, (as I said before) I have come up to London from Applescourt this morning expressly to see *you*. I have a strong motive, as you may imagine—one known only to myself. And I should not venture to place so much confidence in a stranger if my son Esmé had not mentioned your kindness to him in glowing terms to me."

"Mr. Esmé Fielding is too good," murmured Mrs. Arlington. "I have often seen him here; but I cannot recall any occasion on which I have been enabled to show him more than ordinary civility. But will you not remove your walking-things, and allow me to offer you some refreshment? Travelling on such a day must have greatly fatigued you. I should advise a little rest and a cup of tea before you honour me with the confidence you have alluded to."

This was just what Mrs. Fielding desired. She was not prepared to make a full disclosure of her reason for visiting London at once. She wanted to beat about the bush and feel her way a little before she opened fire. And Mrs. Arlington was just of the same mind. Whatever Esmé's mother had come to find out, she would have to show her hand more

openly before she obtained any satisfactory information. They were well matched to sit down and play a game of speculation together.

CHAPTER XXII.

SHE WAS A LILY TOO.

AT last, when they were rested and refreshed, and had mutually paid various compliments, and practised a little light skirmishing, after the manner of women who intend to worm out each other's secrets, Mrs. Arlington led Mrs. Fielding into Colonel Escott's sanctum, and seated her in a luxurious arm-chair near the open window.

"Here, my dear madam," she said, *suavely*, "we shall be secure from interruption, and as comfortable, I think, as this unpleasantly warm weather will permit us to be. This was poor Colonel Escott's sitting-room. I little thought when I superintended its arrangement, on his return from India, last May, that he would give it up so soon."

"It is a charming little apartment," replied Mrs. Fielding, looking round her, "and furnished with exquisite taste. But why do you sigh, Mrs. Arlington,

when you speak of Colonel Escott? Is it not his own choice to leave Mr. Kerrison's house?"

"Yes, madam, it is certainly, for nothing would induce him to remain. But he feels it acutely for all that. You see, Mr. Kerrison and he always intended to remain single, and live together to the end of their lives. And so they would have done had this—this—lady not unfortunately come in the way!"

"His marriage was a sudden arrangement, then, on the part of Mr. Kerrison?"

"Very sudden! I don't think he had known her for more than a couple of months!"

"And who is she, Mrs. Arlington?"

"I cannot tell you, madam, for I do not know!"

"But to what branch of the Power family does she belong? It's an Irish name. You must have seen some of her relations?"

"No! we never saw any of them."

"Not at the wedding?"

"The wedding took place privately. Even Colonel Escott and I heard nothing of it until it was over!"

"Dear me! That is very extraordinary!" said Mrs. Fielding. "And with a man of Mr. Kerrison's fame and popularity too! What is the young lady like? Is she very beautiful?"

“*You* might call her so,” replied Mrs. Arlington, carelessly. “She is tall and thin, with a pale complexion, colourless hair, and washed-out eyes. She impresses me with the idea of consumption; but tastes differ. I suppose Mr. Kerrison considers her perfection. I have heard him say she is the personification of her name *Lily*.”

Mrs. Fielding’s eyes had twinkled brightly at Mrs. Arlington’s description of the bride, but she only remarked, demurely:

“*Lily* is not a common name!”

“It is a striking one. Perhaps Miss Power—Mrs. Kerrison, I should say—adopted it for the purposes of the stage.”

“Was she on the stage, Mrs. Arlington? How shocking!”

“She was indeed! She appeared in London first in Mr. Kerrison’s play, ‘Miss Credo.’ That is how they met. A great misfortune, I am afraid; but it is no use regretting it. And all this time we are neglecting the object of your visit, Mrs. Fielding. I am quite anxious to learn in what way I can be of assistance to you.”

Mrs. Fielding’s eyes were still twinkling with the light of success, but she pretended to be struggling with her difficulty.

"Well, my dear Mrs. Arlington, I feel more diffident as I approach the subject, and less certain that I shall not be worrying you to no purpose; but it was a word or two dropped by Esmé that brought me here. At the same time, as the opinions of mothers and sons do not always agree, may I first claim your kind promise to keep my visit and its design a secret?"

"O, certainly!" cried Lola Arlington, who would have promised anything to get at the truth.

"The fact is, that some time ago I had a girl at Applescourt who turned out very badly. I had engaged her as a companion for myself, having no daughter, whilst my son was abroad. But on his return to England, this girl laid herself out deliberately to entrap the poor boy, and did so far succeed as to cover herself with disgrace, and necessitate my sending her away without warning or character. So far my story is a common one. Such unpleasantnesses happen, I fancy, in most families."

"They certainly *do* happen—sometimes," acquiesced Mrs. Arlington, cautiously.

"Naturally I was very anxious that, once separated, these young people should not meet again. My son Esmé is my only child, Mrs. Arlington. He comes of a high family on both sides, and he is the

sole heir to all my property. You may judge, then, how much I desire that, when he marries, it shall be according to my wishes, and someone of whom I can entirely approve. And yet I cannot help fearing that he still hankers after this wretched creature, Lily Prescott."

"She was a *Lily* too!" exclaimed Mrs. Arlington, involuntarily.

"Yes; that is perhaps why the name of the bride struck me as unpleasantly familiar; and, strange to say, Mrs. Arlington, your description of Mrs. Kerri-son tallies wonderfully with that of Miss Prescott. You noticed, perhaps, my surprise when you mentioned her appearance. I have a bad habit of betraying my feelings. Though, of course, it can only be a chance resemblance. We meet many people as we pass through this world—perfect strangers to each other—who might be taken for relations. But I have Lily Prescott's photograph with me," fumbling in her pocket as she spoke. "It was taken when I believed she was a girl to be trusted, and I found it in one of my drawers yesterday, and brought it up to see if you could recognize it!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I MAY CLAIM MY REWARD."

IN making her last observation Mrs. Fielding played a wrong card, and was made to acknowledge the error without delay. Mrs. Arlington drew herself up stiffly, and inquired:

"How can I possibly recognize a person I have never seen, Mrs. Fielding? The name of *Prescott* is *quite* unfamiliar to me. I do not remember to have heard it before. Did anyone tell you that I had?"

Mrs. Fielding saw she had put her on her guard. She could have bitten out her tongue the next minute for doing it, but it was too late to rectify the error. So she stammered, lamely:

"Well, to tell you the truth, dear Mrs. Arlington, Esmé *did* (in speaking of his London friends to me) so *nearly* reveal that he had met Lily Prescott again, that I have been puzzling my brains ever since to think *where* it could have happened, and determined to come up and ask your advice. You see it might

have been *anywhere*, and knowing Mr. Kerrison received so many young ladies from the theatres and such-like places, I thought it *might* have been here. And—now let me make a friend of you, dear madam, and tell you *everything*—I would give hundreds to prevent Esmé meeting this girl again. She is thoroughly bad and unprincipled, and—you will forgive a mother's anxiety for her only son—she is not a fit associate for any young man. And I thought perhaps—if it *were* here he had met her—I should be doing a kindness also to you (who have been so kind to my dear boy) by putting you on your guard against her.”

But Mrs. Fielding had done more—she had put Mrs. Arlington on guard against herself. The fair Lola had taken in the situation at a glance. If her rival should prove to be the disgraced Lily Prescott under an assumed name, she held the game in her own hands, to be played as suited her convenience. And she meant to have no partner in it. It was to be a game of *solitaire*. All she needed for her purpose was to see the photograph.

“I cannot thank you sufficiently for your kind interest in me, Mrs. Fielding,” she answered, sweetly; “but I hardly think I shall be able to help you. Is Miss Prescott on the stage?”

"I have heard nothing of her since she left my service. She disgraced herself too terribly for me to wish to hear anything. But she *may* be for aught I know to the contrary."

"Perhaps the photograph will help us," said Mrs. Arlington, lightly.

Mrs. Fielding placed it in her hands. Yes, there was no doubt about it. It *was* the likeness of Lily Power!

She had been less thin in those youthful days. The face was rounder—the smile more content; but the girl who stood for that picture was the same girl Mark Kerrison had made his wife. And yet Mrs. Arlington gazed at it without the least sign of recognition on her countenance.

"It is a pretty face," she remarked, presently; "and the young lady must have been very youthful when it was taken."

"You do not recognize it, then?" inquired Mrs. Fielding, anxiously.

Lola Arlington looked up at her with open eyes.

"*Recognize it!* How could I? I told you I had never even heard the name before."

"But people change their names occasionally, and I am sure she had every reason to change hers. Does it remind you of anybody you have seen?"

Mrs. Arlington shook her head determinately.

“*No one.* But if your heart is very much bent on discovering if Mr. Esmé Fielding is still in communication with this young lady, I might be able to help you in my poor way.”

“I shall be everlastingly grateful to you if you will. But how shall you set about it?”

“Ah, that is *my* secret, Mrs. Fielding!” cried the other, laughing; “and you must not ask me to divulge it. Only leave me the photograph for a few weeks, and you shall have the first intimation of any discovery I may make.”

“You will not show it to my son, or tell him of my visiting you?” said the mother, fearfully.

“Mrs. Fielding! *am I a woman?* Please credit me with a little more *finesse* and tact than that amounts to. Of course I shall not allude to the subject by so much as the merest hint before Mr. Fielding. But I may tell you one thing—he has already gone so far as to tell me that there is a young lady in London whose address he is anxious to discover. But this was months ago; he may have found her out before now.”

“I am *sure* he has!” cried Mrs. Fielding, clasping her hands. “If you had seen his change of manner the other morning when I read out to him

the announcement of Mr. Kerrison's marriage, you would have divined at once there was something wrong. Indeed it was that which excited my suspicions. I could not help suspecting—you must promise me never to mention this again, but I could not help believing—that Miss Lily Power and Lily Prescott were one and the same person; but I should not dare to say so to any one but yourself."

Mrs. Arlington's sense of the ludicrous was so tickled by this idea that her mirth was positively infectious.

"O! dear, O dear," she gasped. "What would poor dear Mr. Kerrison say to such a notion? I believe he would kill you, or me, or Mr. Esmé Fielding! The Lily Bride a disgraced companion. My dear madam, pray—*pray* never speak of such a doubt again. You must have been utterly and completely led away by your imagination. Mrs. Mark Kerrison is an elegant, stately young person who has never stooped to service, or had the least slur cast upon her character. You must put this ridiculous fancy out of your head once and for ever."

Mrs. Fielding was a lady of much importance in her own estimation, and did not at all relish being called "ridiculous" by a housekeeper. But when we have placed ourselves in the wrong, we

are apt to be compelled to swallow humble pie. The mistress of Applescourt had to do so on this occasion, and join in the laugh against herself.

“I am really ashamed to think I should have made such a ludicrous mistake,” she faltered, “but you must ascribe it entirely to my solicitude about my son. I know how obstinate young men are, and that the very opposition they encounter makes their wishes ten times more desirable to them. I would give,” she continued presently—for she could not divest her mind of the idea that Mrs. Arlington knew more than she chose to divulge—“I would give anyone a hundred pounds who would bring me undeniable proofs that Lily Prescott is dead, or married.”

“The first will be the safer assurance to receive of the two,” replied Lola Arlington. “Well, Mrs. Fielding, I will keep my eyes open on your behalf, and perhaps some day I may come and claim my reward. Meanwhile—”

“Meanwhile if you ever come across her under any circumstances, keep my dear Esmé, at all risks, out of her sight.”

“Ah! now, my dear madam, you set me a task beyond my powers, for, believe me, I have no influence over Mr. Fielding. His godfather, who is

really fond of him, would be a far better person to apply to."

"Ah! no," exclaimed Mrs. Fielding with a shudder; "Colonel Escott is too good and unworldly for my purpose. He would advise my boy to marry the girl, whatever came of it. He holds these old-fashioned ideas of love and honour, which are very estimable, no doubt, but quite unfitted to assist a young man to make his way through the world."

"He is a truly good man," said Mrs. Arlington, with one of those sudden convictions which are borne in occasionally on every soul, however low it may have sunk in wickedness.

"O, certainly! But in a case like this we want tact, and not virtue; and it is to *your* tact, Mrs. Arlington, that I look for assistance in my extremity."

"I will do my best for you," repeated the younger woman, as she pocketed the photograph and lay back in her chair, as though to intimate the subject was exhausted.

But long after Mrs. Fielding had returned to Applescourt, Lola Arlington sat there, with her full, dark eyes turned up to the evening sky, and tried to think out the mystery.

There was no doubt of one thing—Lily Prescott, the discharged and disgraced companion of Mrs.

Fielding, and Lily Power, the wife of the most popular dramatist of the day, and the mistress of the house she sat in, were one and the same person. So far all was plain; and Esmé Fielding had been the lover of Lily Prescott, and was the lover of Lily Kerrison. So much she had gleaned from *maman's* prophecies and his own admissions; and *she* loved Kerrison with all her heart and soul, and would give her life to see her rival exposed and cast out upon the world again! But how to manage it without bringing down the wrath of the outraged husband on her devoted head?

Here was a pretty mystery!—an intricate game of chance! But life to Lola Arlington was composed of such intrigues; she cared for nothing else.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I DON'T LIKE HIM."

It is difficult to analyze the motive that made Lily Power accept so readily the hand of Mark Kerrison. It was certainly not from avarice or ambition. No girl loved money less, or the luxuries that money can procure us. And no one had a humbler mind, or shrank more from publicity than she did.

Not that she was unintelligent, or ignorant of her own powers. On the contrary, she had proved herself to be a very capable artist; and her ideas and opinions, on serious subjects, astonished Mark Kerrison himself. He had never supposed so young a woman to be capable of so much thought.

But the greatest of minds are always the most diffident of their strength—the most reluctant to display their resources. Therefore, although she was quite competent to fill the position to which her marriage had raised her, Lily Kerrison was anything but anxious to commence her reign in Hyde Park

Gardens, and would have been content to be hidden for ever from the world in the shooting-box at Glencara. And the same feeling made her cling to her husband in a child-like manner, which enchanted him, but which seemed to denote a great deal more of affection on her part than it really did.

The fact is that she had married him with a great fear knocking at her heart, and his offer presented a refuge from it, in which she thought she would be safe for ever.

The period she had spent in Mrs. Fielding's house, and the terrible episode which had been the cause of her leaving it, were burned in upon her brain in letters of fire.

Her relations, all gentle-people, in respectable positions of life, had believed the cruel story spread against her, and refused to receive her since.

Our relations generally *are* the ones to believe the worst of us, and in their craven fear lest their own names should be besmirched with ours, make no allowance, and accord no sympathy.

Lily had thenceforth, therefore, to make her way in the wide world alone. To affirm that she had erased the love of Esmé Fielding from her heart would be untrue.

She was very proud, but very affectionate, and

hating the sin, she loved the sinner still, which perhaps made her hate herself the most of all.

His finding her out, and following her to her lodgings, had filled her breast with a great dread, not of his violence or reproaches, but of his persuasion. She feared lest in a weak moment she might yield to it, and cast in her lot with his. She doubted her own powers of resistance. She trembled when she thought of the passionate love in her bosom; that love, for cherishing which she despised herself, and she longed to find some barrier to build up between them; and when Mark Kerrison asked her to become his wife she saw the stronghold it presented her at once. As Mrs. Kerrison, *who* would dare to molest or persecute her?

Even Mrs. Fielding's rancorous tongue would be silenced, and no visitor could gain admittance to her presence whom she ordered to be kept out. Marriage meant safety and privacy to her. It meant a sheltered home, with no further occasion to appear in public to earn her daily bread, and a trusty friend always ready to watch her interests and supply her need.

Is it any wonder that she took the goods the gods provided her? And as the days of the honeymoon slipped away she found no reason to be less

grateful. Mark Kerrison was an adoring husband, but still he was a considerate one. He had left off expecting to receive love from women, and the little Lily bestowed on him was quite enough to make him happy. They were more like two good friends together than husband and wife; but Kerrison had lived a purer life than most men, and had few remembrances of the "roses of rapture" to bring in contrast with his present calm existence.

But Lily often wished that she had been more explicit with him before their marriage on the subject of Esmé Fielding. She had had no idea then that there was any connection between the families. She had never heard his name mentioned by Kerrison until she so unexpectedly encountered him at his dinner table, and then she imagined he was a chance guest, whom it would be easy for her to shake off again. But it is difficult to express an opinion concerning another person without adducing a reason for it.

The first time Esmé Fielding's name rose up between them after her marriage, it filled her soul with dismay. There were French windows in the breakfast-room at Glencara that opened on to a shady veranda, and Lily was seated at one of them waiting the advent of her husband.

She looked younger than her age by several

years, clad in a simple white gown, and with her pale golden hair plaited in two long tresses on either side of her head. Her eyes appeared to be gazing only on the expanse of moor spread out before her—a purple mass of heather-bloom, like the violet mists encircling the Alps at sunset, and palpitating, as the morning breeze moved through it, like a living thing. But her thoughts were far away—wandering in a world of her own, as she wondered, half guiltily, if *he* had heard of her marriage yet, and whether a day would ever dawn when she could think less contemptuously of him than she did at that moment. Her reverie was broken by Mark Kerrison's kindly voice.

"Dreaming still, my darling," he said, as he put his arm about her, "wishing it was all undone again, and you were back in your stuffy little rooms in the Waterloo Road?"

"Anything but *that*," she answered, with a faint smile, as she gently pressed the hand that clasped her waist.

There are some women who, having lost the one great good they attained to, cannot even find comfort in the affection of another man. Lily Kerrison was not one of them. She was very childlike in her nature. She loved to be loved and taken care

of. She had had so little of it during her lifetime; and though she did not respond after the same fashion perhaps, so long as she was allowed to show her gratitude in her own way, it was a pleasure to know she was the object of so much devotion; and Mark Kerrison was quite satisfied with her behaviour. Like most men who did not fall in love until they have reached middle age, he was extravagantly fond of his young wife. He positively adored her. He thought she was the loveliest, most charming, and most amiable creature he had ever met, and how she could ever have consented to marry himself was a riddle he had not yet found the solution of. The faintest smile she gave him—the feeblest pressure she laid upon his hand—were sources of ecstasy that set him marvelling at his own happiness.

He was far less selfish and exacting in his love than younger men, who expect to be worshipped rather than to worship; and the very restraint he put upon his feelings for fear of wounding his wife's susceptibilities, bound her closer to him. Indeed, they were already, after ten days of matrimony, in a fair way to become fast and faithful friends. Only Lily wished so much that she had had the courage to tell him *all*.

“Not quite tired of me yet?” continued Mark

Kerrison, emboldened by her smile. "Not quite sick of being shut up in a little cottage on a lonely moor, with no better companion than an old man who bores you to death with his admiration and his kisses?"

"Have I ever said so?" demanded Lily.

"No; you have been the very sweetest and most patient of women under it all. Yet I wish I had been successful in procuring a little society for you. It would have made the evenings pleasanter. I hoped Escott would have joined us by this time, but he writes me word he cannot come. I am afraid the dear old boy is a little bit sulky at our marriage. I cannot account for his preferring London in August to the grouse in any other way."

"O, I hope not!" exclaimed Lily, quickly, "for it would make me so unhappy to come between you and any of your friends. And you have known Colonel Escott all your life, have you not? He may well hate me if I am the means of separating you."

"My darling!" cried Kerrison, "if Jem has any feeling of the kind it will soon pass away. And what do you suppose *I* should care if I lost every friend I ever made in comparison with the joy I feel in possessing you! I have not thought of the

matter since. I should not have thought of it at all except as it affects yourself; but Jem is a good fellow at heart, and I am sure you will like him. *Why* he refuses to come here I cannot imagine."

"Perhaps he is afraid he would be *de trop*," said Lily, shyly.

Her husband laughed.

"I provided even against that. I promised not to excite his envy by too open a display of my happiness, and I told him to bring up young Fielding (or any one he liked) as a companion."

"*Who* did you tell him to bring up?" asked Lily, in a constrained voice.

"Esmé Fielding, the young fellow who dined with us the same night as the 'Credo' company. O, I forgot, though. You were taken ill, poor child, and doubtless never observed him. However, he is a godson of Jem's (who was a distant cousin, I believe, of his father's) and they are very much together. He stayed with us for several weeks at the beginning of the season, and I hope he may do so again. He is a fine young man, and I like him."

"*I don't*," said his wife, in a low voice.

"*You* don't? Do you remember him, then? But you saw nothing of him, my dear! How can you tell whether you would like him or not?"

"I judge from his appearance. I often judge of people so, and I generally find I am correct. I saw Mr. Fielding plainly enough all through dinner-time, and I *don't like him*. I hope you won't ask him to the house when we go back, Mark. I should so much rather not know him."

She uttered the words in such a pleading tone, and with so humble an expression, that her husband's sympathy was aroused at once.

"My own child—my darling Lily, of course not—a thousand times over—if you have the slightest objection. Understand, my love, that from the moment you enter my house you reign supreme there. I will turn every servant out of it, and cut every friend I have ever made, if it would give you any pleasure."

"Oh, Mark! don't think so badly of me as that!" she replied, with a delicate colour mantling in her cheeks; "for my part, I should wish to be a friend of all your friends, but I don't *quite* like Mr. Esmé Fielding."

"And what about Riley, my dear, and poor old Jem? Do their phrenological bumps satisfy you or not?"

"Now you are laughing at me, Mark, and that is not fair! I did not observe Captain Riley, but

Colonel Escott seems very nice, though he did not speak to me much. He was so taken up with your lady-secretary. What is her name? Mrs. Arlington?"

Kerrison frowned.

"I half suspect Mrs. Arlington is at the bottom of Jem's leaving us, Lily, and it displeases me. You see, my darling, before I had ever met you and made an old idiot of myself, Escott and I came to the conclusion to pass our lives together, and I did not anticipate that my marriage would rupture the contract. However, he insists upon taking chambers for himself, and it hurts me terribly!"

"But what has Mrs. Arlington to do with the matter?" inquired Lily.

"Well! she never liked poor Escott from the beginning, and has taken various means to let him know it; they have seemed better friends of late, but I do not think the feud is forgotten, and perhaps she has taken advantage of poor Jem's fear of being in our way to get rid of him altogether."

"But that is going rather beyond her province as your housekeeper and literary assistant," said Lily. "Mark, don't be vexed with me, but I fancy Mrs. Arlington has a dreadful temper. She frightens me somehow, her eyes are so black, and—and—malignant!"

"*Malignant!* O, what a big word to apply to a woman's whims. Say, rather, that her eyes are envious, Lily. What eyes would not be, looking at you and me? The women's—because they are jealous of your beauty—the men's, because they grudge me the possession of it. Poor Lola Arlington is but human. You must not be too hard upon her if she looks dissatisfied when she compares your lot with her own."

"She may well envy me my dear, good husband," replied Lily, softly.

"My darling girl, it is *I* only who am to be envied; but *à propos* of Mrs. Arlington; if she displeases you, or makes you nervous, she must go!"

"My dear Mark! what a notion, and when she is of so much use to you. I would not hear of such a thing; why, she is your *factotum*, is she not? Orders your dinners, and looks after your servants. I am afraid you would find my services a sorry substitute."

"I don't want you to be troubled about anything, my Lily. I want you simply to enjoy your life, and let others wait upon you; that is why I have not dethroned Mrs. Arlington from her position as house-keeper, until I had learnt your wishes on the subject. If you prefer to look after such things yourself, say

so, and I shall retain her simply as my secretary. If you do not care about the trouble, she can continue to manage the house as she has hitherto done."

"O! pray let everything go on in the same routine, Mark. I should be a shocking bad manager. You know I have never had any experience in such things. Only——"

"Only *what*, my darling?"

"Don't let Mrs. Arlington come much in contact with me, because I am afraid we might not agree."

Mark Kerrison knit his brows.

"There must be no question of your agreeing, or not agreeing, Lily. Lola Arlington was not always in the inferior position she occupies at present; but the fact remains that she is my servant, and as such must defer in all things to the mistress of the house. We have spoken on this subject together, and she perfectly understands what is expected of her. The matter now rests entirely with you. Keep her in her place from the beginning, my dear, and all will go well. Be kind to her, but not familiar. She dines at table with us, but it is as a privilege, not a right, and you can always let her understand that you remember it. If you can manage in this way to make the household wheels work smoothly I shall reap the benefit of it, for there is no doubt that Mrs. Arlington is

very useful to me, and that I should find it difficult to replace her."

Lily put her arm round her husband's neck, and looked up confidingly in his face.

"And do you think that *I*, to whom you have been so good, and who owe everything to your generosity, would wish to deprive you of the services of anyone who can lighten your labour? Why! I would make friends with the old gentleman himself if I thought it would be of any assistance to you——"

Mark Kerrison strained her to his heart.

"My dearest wife! You are a thousand times too good for me. I feel ashamed to think I can offer you so little in return for all your love."

"No, no!" she cried, shrinking from him. "Don't say that. Only take it, the best I can give you, as a small expression of my gratitude for the haven of rest to which you have brought me."

"And where nothing that I can prevent shall ever disturb your peace," he answered. "Not even Mrs. Arlington."

"O! let us forget Mrs. Arlington for the present," said Lily, impatiently. "It was foolish of me to mention her. After all, as you say, she is only a servant, and her tempers are beneath my notice."

"You will never see much of them," replied Mark

Kerrison. "I will take care of that, Lily, for the first time she presumes to exhibit such a thing before you, *she goes!*"

CHAPTER XXV.

"WAR TO THE KNIFE."

THE day that the Kerrisons returned from Glencara was an epoch in the household.

Mrs. Arlington had schooled herself for the occasion. Though she was still burning with mortification at the failure of her hopes, she recognized the fact that, if she was to continue in her situation, she must preserve at least an outward appearance of deference to Mark Kerrison's wife, and had resolved of two evils to choose the least. But it had not entered her mind that she would be deposed from the position she had been permitted to assume.

Since she had been promoted to dine at the same table as her employers, she had given herself all the airs and graces of a lady, and required more waiting on and attention than they did. The retiring and somewhat submissive aspect which she had formerly exhibited had entirely vanished, and she

had become rather aggressive in pushing herself forward and doing the honours of the house instead.

She intended to make herself agreeable, after her fashion, to the new Mrs. Kerrison, but it never struck her that Lily would have the assurance to put her in her place. She remembered her only as a pale, silent, apparently timid young woman, who was not likely to assert herself however undemonstrative she might be.

When she was, therefore, prepared to receive the bride in an effusive and somewhat patronizing manner, Mrs. Arlington imagined she had done all that was necessary to meet Mark Kerrison's wishes on the subject. For she thought only of him; his wife occupied but a secondary place in her consideration.

On the evening when they were expected home to dinner she arrayed herself with much care in a black lace dress, that displayed her arms and neck in a liberal manner, whilst in her bosom bloomed a large bunch of sweet-scented tea-roses. Her cheeks were unusually pale, with the greenish pallor that accompanies dark blood, but her lips were scarlet, and her eyes glowed like two stars.

Colonel Escott, who had been asked to welcome his friends to their home, thought he had never seen

her look so handsome before, and told her the fact without hesitation.

Lola smiled at the compliment, and pretended to enjoy it, whilst her ears were pricked up to catch the first sound of the returning carriage-wheels.

At last they arrived. The handsome barouche which Mr. Kerrison had bought for his bride stopped at the door, and in another minute Colonel Escott had wrung Mark's hand, and was helping Mrs. Kerrison to alight from the vehicle, whilst Mrs. Arlington stood in the hall smiling, to receive her.

Lily looked tired from her long journey, but she was still reserved and dignified. The caution her husband had given her respecting Mrs. Arlington was in her mind as she entered her own house for the first time, and when the latter came forward with an outstretched hand she failed to see it, but with a distant bow passed on to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Arlington became dumb with rage. She accepted Mark Kerrison's greeting in silence, and did not attempt to follow in the footsteps of his wife.

"How are you, Mrs. Arlington?" he said, cheerily. "We have had a long journey; I am afraid my wife is terribly tired. Please let us have dinner at once," and hurried on without further comment.

"Did you see *that?*?" asked Mrs. Arlington, with closed teeth, to Colonel Escott, who lingered by her side.

"See *what?*?"

"The way she treated me. She did not even take my hand!"

"Mrs. Kerrison? O, she did not mean it. It must have been an oversight. You mustn't feel umbrage at trifles. She is tired; don't judge her till to-morrow."

But all Mrs. Arlington did was to turn from him, and order the footman to desire the cook to "dish up" at once.

Meanwhile, Mark Kerrison was fussing over Lily in the drawing-room.

"My darling, you look quite cold! They ought to have had a fire for you. These September evenings become chilly. Where is your maid? Why is she not here?"

"I don't know; I have not seen her," replied his wife. "Cannot Mrs. Arlington send her to me?"

"Here! Mrs. Arlington," cried Kerrison, from the open door, "where is Mrs. Kerrison's maid? Why don't you tell her to come and attend to her mistress? And we should like a fire lighted in the bed-room. Come! bustle about, there's a good crea-

ture, and see after our comforts a little! My wife is worn out with travelling."

He spoke impatiently, and Mrs. Arlington shrugged her shoulders, as she gave the necessary orders before entering the presence of Lily Kerrison.

"Will you go upstairs now? I think you will find the room ready and the maid in attendance," she said, in a cool voice, as she addressed her; "and perhaps you would like to have your dinner sent up there to-night? It will be no trouble if you prefer it!"

Lily turned her eyes upon her in calm surprise.

"Thanks! But if I had wished it I should have ordered it so. Mark, I think I will go and take off my things before dinner," and, slipping her hand through his arm, she left the drawing-room.

"Had you not better offer your services to Mrs. Kerrison? I think Mark will expect it," said Colonel Escott to Mrs. Arlington, a few minutes later, as, attracted by her playing on the piano, he entered, and found her sitting there alone.

"I shall do no such thing! She has her lady's-maid, and I was not engaged to wait upon her; she seems more stuck-up and disagreeable than ever. Poor Mr. Kerrison bids fair to have a nice life of it!"

Meanwhile Lily was saying to her husband:

"Mark, is she going to dine with us in that dress? For a woman in her position it is utterly absurd! Bare neck and arms by daylight—I don't call it decent!"

Mark Kerrison scented trouble ahead of him.

"My dear girl, you must settle that matter between you; it is quite out of my province, though I certainly consider such a display to be perfectly unnecessary."

"It is ridiculous! and for a family dinner too! But it would be out of place at any time! I shall speak to her about it on the first opportunity."

After which Mrs. Kerrison came down to the table herself in a high brown velvet dress, in which she looked preeminently fair and delicate, and directed her attention almost entirely to her husband and the Colonel, answering Mrs. Arlington's flippant remarks in monosyllables, and glancing every now and then with stern displeasure at her liberal display of bust, arms, and shoulders. Already there was thunder in the air.

"How did you enjoy your grouse-shooting?" inquired Escott of his friend.

"So—so! The birds were rather shy, but I should have had a good time on the whole had I

not been troubled with the idea that Lily was lonely at the Lodge. It is dull work being shut up on the moors, without the means of getting about."

"Affords too much time for *thought*," remarked Mrs. Arlington, sweetly.

"That depends upon what you have to think about," laughed the Colonel, glancing at the bride.

"Of course!" sighed Lola; "but few people who have come to years of discretion, Colonel, have not *some* melancholy reminiscences to attack them when alone."

"Not when they're just married, surely?" he rejoined, lightly.

"You must appeal to Mrs. Kerrison for your answer," replied Mrs. Arlington; "I was married so terribly young, that I had no past to look back upon. Only fifteen! No time to have had a lover, or even to know the meaning of love! But few wives have had *my* experience."

"Do you mean *before* or *afterwards*?" inquired Lily, innocently.

"I mean *before*, Mrs. Kerrison!" said Mrs. Arlington, delighted to have drawn her into the discussion. "I had had no opportunity to jilt anyone, or to allow anyone to jilt me. *Some* young ladies have lived a lifetime before their wedding-day, and go to the

altar with their consciences burdened with dark secrets they dare not disclose to their husbands! But I was different; my soul was like a white sheet of paper—unwritten on—and my husband was responsible for every character that was inscribed upon it.”

Mrs. Kerrison had regarded the speaker earnestly during the delivery of this little tirade; when it was finished she observed, quickly:

“*You* were lucky—and *he* was lucky! I hope he never inscribed a character there for which you need blush. Mark, I will take another cutlet.”

The die was cast in that brief sentence.

The women had measured their weapons, and knew what they had to expect from each other. They had hardly exchanged a dozen words, but it was going to be war to the knife between them.

When Mrs. Kerrison rose from the dinner without deigning to give Mrs. Arlington an intimation of her design, and swept out of the room before her, Lola knew that her reign was over. This upstart from the boards of a theatre, with a secret social ban upon her, intended to *keep her in her place!* She little dreamed that the sword of Damocles was hanging by its single hair above her head! But the

climax of Mrs. Arlington's indignation was not yet reached.

Lily walked about her handsome drawing-room for some moments in silence, examining the ornaments and pictures, sat down for a few minutes to the grand piano and played through part of a waltz, then threw herself on the sofa and desired Mrs. Arlington to ring for coffee.

The footman appeared with the silver tray, deposited it on a side table, and began to pour out the fragrant beverage.

"I believe this is *your* province," said Mrs. Kerrison, with a faint smile, to Mrs. Arlington; "tell the man to leave it, please, I should prefer being waited on by you."

The footman quitted the room, and Lola commenced, with a darkening brow, to dispense the coffee.

"Did you expect any guests to-night beside Colonel Escott?" demanded Lily, presently.

"*Guests!*—no! Why do you ask me?" returned Mrs. Arlington, sharply.

"Because of your dress. It struck me as so unsuitable for a family party; and indeed I think at all times that a high dress is better than a low one at the dinner-table. You will oblige me by not

wearing it again, if only because I always wear high dresses myself."

"Well, really!" exclaimed Mrs. Arlington, with a toss of her head. "I have been in Mr. Kerrison's employment now for three years, and I never heard a complaint made about my dress before!"

"I daresay not. You see, it doesn't signify with bachelors; but now I shall be having ladies to dine with us, and it is best not to excite remark."

"It would be well, Mrs. Kerrison, if no one had ever excited more remark than I have."

"I don't understand your answer," said Lily, flushing, "and it was quite unnecessary; I was only telling you my wishes."

Mrs. Arlington did not make any further reply, but her bosom heaved rapidly, and she had great difficulty in holding her tongue.

Mark Kerrison entered after a few minutes and took his wife up to her own room. She said good-night in passing, but did not offer her hand; and as soon as she was out of sight Lola Arlington flung herself down upon the satin sofa and burst into a flood of tears.

Colonel Escott, coming upon her in that condition, overwhelmed her with sympathy.

"My dearest Mrs. Arlington, what is the matter?"

Are you ill, or has anything occurred to vex you? Pray tell me your trouble; you know that you have promised me your confidence."

"*Anything occurred to vex me!* How can you ask? Didn't you see how that woman treated me at dinner—with marked impertinence? And since we have been in the drawing-room together she has ordered me to wait upon her as if I was a servant, and dared—yes, actually *dared*—to criticise my dress, and to tell me I must alter it."

"*Your dress!*" repeated the Colonel, gazing with admiration at the creamy-white arms and shoulders that were displayed before him. "What fault could she find with *that*? Why, it is just perfect!"

"I know it is. I suppose the cat is envious because she cannot afford to wear a low-cut dress herself, and so she says it is not *suitable* for my position! But I will not stand it, Colonel Escott! I am not going to remain here to be ordered about by that girl, and told what I am to wear! And if you only knew what I know about her!"

"*About Mrs. Kerrison!*" gasped Escott.

"Hush! I ought not to have mentioned it. But nothing will induce me to submit to her tyranny! I will leave the house to-night, and never come near it again!"

"But what would poor Kerrison do without you?" cried the Colonel, with his first thought for his friend.

"He must do as best he can; unless, indeed, he chooses to control his wife. But my life will be a misery—a torment—to me!"

"If you can't agree with *her*, it certainly will be," acquiesced Escott; "but, Lola, if I may call you so, you know *where* you will always find a welcome and a home. Don't be downcast, my dear; if the worst comes to the worst, *come to me*."

"O, Colonel Escott! I have told you it cannot be!"

"Not as my housekeeper—that would be absurd!—but as my wife! I know I have nothing to offer you worthy of your acceptance; I am not rich, like Kerrison, or able to give you a house and carriage and horses, such as you are fitted to adorn; but you would have a *home*, Lola, and respect and affection to your life's end. I feel ashamed to have so little to offer in exchange for yourself, but all I say is, don't despair whilst a shelter remains open to you."

He spoke very diffidently, this noble gentleman, whose true love any woman might have been proud to possess, and he laid his hand with a very timid touch upon her dark hair as he said the words.

And Mrs. Arlington laughed within herself at the absurdity of his proposal as she lay prone upon the sofa, with her face concealed from him, although she professed to answer it with a bashfulness equal to his own.

“O! Colonel Escott! You are too good to me! I have always told you so; but I would not overweight you (at least for the present) with such a burden as myself. Let me struggle on—this is only a little natural disappointment, which will soon pass away—and try to do my duty; and then, if everything fails, and I am fated to be unsuccessful, I will not forget the generous offer you have made me to-night.”

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